



Spring 2011

The Lantern, 2010-2011

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Recommended Citation

Aungst, Joshua; Blythe, Amanda; Castanzo, Dominic; Cichowski, Kristin; DiPrinzio, Elisa; Graven, Atticus; Haley, Brooke; Krigman, Josh; Martikainen-Watcke, Greta; McNamara, Connor; Metcalf-Kelly, Logan; Mooney, Benjamin; Murray, Andy; Owen, Samantha; Perry, Rachel; Rolleston, Ellyn; Sherman, Scott; Speaker, Dixon; Zumpano, Trevor; Round, Sarah; Clark, Rosie; Kosik, Edwin; Hanford, Nick; Donnachie, Alyse; Eron, Andrew; Kowalski, Shane; Krigman, Josh; Lorine, Anna; McDonnell, Tony; McGinn, MJ; Nunes, Rayna; Palmisano, Jonathan; Cavanaugh, Allison; Cogswell, Sarah; DiCaprio, Adam; Goldcamp, Noelle; Harper, James; Hogan, Lindsay; Kram, Cory; Murphy, Katherine; Ross, Arielle; and Dohm, Regan, "The Lantern, 2010-2011" (2011). *The Lantern Literary Magazines*. 177.
<https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/lantern/177>

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The Lantern





THE LANTERN



Volume 80
Issue I
2010-2011

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Debbie Harry once asked the world to “make it magnificent,” which is a command that *The Lantern* staff have taken to heart for the 2010-2011 issue. With the changes initiated last year, we already knew that we had a beautiful template to work from and with an impressive array of literary figures present on campus, we had the spark to reach for greatness. While this ain't no *Paris Review*, the object that you are now holding in your hands is still (at least in my opinion) a fantastic representation of a talented generation of Ursinus students. Treat it well, leave copies in your common room, read a few poems in between classes, give a high five to a writer you liked – this is a magazine for everyone.

The Lantern is not the only thing on campus to have changed this year and with the passing of President John Strassburger, we have lost not only a fantastic figure at the school, but a champion of this little publication. His warmth, dedication, and impeccable bowtie will be missed. I'd like to dedicate this issue of *The Lantern* to his legacy, both as a leader and supporter of the arts.

Through the nights of marathon poetry scoring and proofreading, the ghosts of Dan, Chris, Marjorie, Amber and Nicole (as well as a decent caffeine buzz) kept me going and I am indebted to their editorial guidance. In moments of utter confusion, Robert Whitehead helped me keep it fresh, while Dr. Volkmer and Dr. Keita helped me keep it real. But really, it was my crack staff and enthusiastic contributors who made this *Lantern* the gem that it is. Finally, a shout out to Kristin O'Brassill, who encouraged me to submit my first piece to *The Lantern* which led me to four wonderful years work.

It's been magnificent,
Abby Raymond

TABLE OF CONTENTS

P^{oetry}

The Graterford Department of Corrections	<i>Joshua Aungst</i>	19
Visiting Room: Lewis Considers the Space & Time Continuum	<i>Joshua Aungst</i>	29
String	<i>Amanda Blythe</i>	30
The Tale of Lad Wadley	<i>Dominic Castanzo</i>	31
The Devout	<i>Kristin Cichowski</i>	37
One Moment in the Garden	<i>Elisa DiPrinzio</i>	54
Water, Focused and Tumbling	<i>Elisa DiPrinzio</i>	55
Bomber	<i>Atticus Graven</i>	77
Another	<i>Brooke Haley</i>	79
I Walked Home	<i>Josh Krigman</i>	126
Perhe	<i>Greta Martikainen-Watcke</i>	145
I Describe the Last Time My Parents Had Sex	<i>Connor McNamara</i>	159
Butterflies	<i>Logan Metcalf-Kelly</i>	161
Ship Without Fools	<i>Benjamin Mooney</i>	162
The Interview	<i>Andy Murray</i>	163
Cyane	<i>Samantha Owen</i>	166

TABLE OF CONTENTS (CONT'D)

An Imaginary Portrait of Stella as a Young Girl	<i>Rachel Perry</i>	182
At the Farm Market in Early Autumn	<i>Ellyn Rolleston</i>	183
Victor Jorgenson's Photograph of the V-J Day Kiss	<i>Ellyn Rolleston</i>	184
Lightning	<i>Scott Sherman</i>	185
The Citadel	<i>Scott Sherman</i>	186
Whenever You Come Home From School	<i>Dixon Speaker</i>	188
It Came in a Dream	<i>Trevor Zumpano</i>	190
What I Know About Fission	<i>Trevor Zumpano</i>	192

Non-Fiction/Drama

Please Don't Fire Me for Saying Such Things	<i>Sarah Round</i>	11
<i>Femina Irata</i>	<i>Rosie Clark</i>	39
Thank You For Shopping	<i>Rosie Clark</i>	47
Sunday, November 27th	<i>Edwin Kosik</i>	99
An Introduction to The Lifestyle	<i>Greta Martikainen-Watchke</i>	134

TABLE OF CONTENTS (CONT'D)

Fiction

Laid-Off Perception	<i>Nick Hanford</i>	21
Good-Night, Sweet Prince	<i>Joshua Aungst</i>	22
Requiem for a Marriage	<i>Alyse Donnachie</i>	58
Gertrude's Book	<i>Andrew Eron</i>	69
Passing	<i>Edwin Kosik</i>	97
Elk Run II	<i>Shane Kowalski</i>	102
Shady Tides	<i>Shane Kowalski</i>	108
A Quiet House	<i>Josh Krigman</i>	122
Tell Him. A Manual	<i>Anna Lorine</i>	127
Silence	<i>Tony McDonnell</i>	147
Google This	<i>MJ McGinn</i>	154
The Dinner Table Dance	<i>Rayna Nunes</i>	164
The Inevitable Extinction of Filing Cabinets	<i>Jonathan Palmisano</i>	169

Visual Arts

Château d'If	<i>Allison Cavanaugh</i>	81
Man Smoking in Charcoal	<i>Sarah Cogswell</i>	82
Inside Auschwitz	<i>Adam DiCaprio</i>	83
Bark Glow	<i>Noelle Goldcamp</i>	84

TABLE OF CONTENTS (CONT'D)

Anticipation	<i>Nick Hanford</i>	84
Look Up	<i>Nick Hanford</i>	86
Major News Networks	<i>Nick Hanford</i>	87
Others Wage War	<i>James Harper</i>	88
Insert Bible Verse Here	<i>Lindsay Hogan</i>	89
The Empress	<i>Lindsay Hogan</i>	90
Candy Castle	<i>Cory Kram</i>	91
Venice, Italy	<i>Josh Krigman</i>	92
Quebec	<i>Kate Murphy</i>	93
Bhutanese Child	<i>Arielle Ross</i>	94
Jumper	<i>Arielle Ross</i>	95
Pomegranates	<i>Arielle Ross</i>	96

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Octopus Hat	<i>Regan Dohm</i>
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JUDGE'S NOTES

Prose Winner—"Please Don't Fire Me for Saying Such Things" by Sarah Round

Sarah Round's personal essay "Please Don't Fire Me for Saying Such Things" is a stunning work of non-fiction that demonstrates qualities enviable to any fiction writer. Observing daily life (and death) in an animal hospital, Sarah makes the ordinary extraordinary. Her engaging narrative voice is full of wit, insight and sympathy, as she tells the tale of a dying cat and its owner. Concrete details are provided with authoritative expertise, giving the essay a sense of absolute plausibility, yet Sarah's vision is toward larger truths, involving love and loss. The writer arrives at personal insights that inspire revelations of our own. But it is the story after all that makes this essay great—which is a comfort to this judge, who, for this contest, must consider the often unshared merits of fiction and non-fiction. And of course there is Sarah Round's writing, too: I found myself rereading sentences, even as I ached to find out what happened next. In the end I felt wiser, filled with the aftereffects of having experienced that unique pleasure of reading something true and beautiful.

Jim Zervanos's fiction has appeared in numerous publications, including the *Cimarron Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, and *Philly Fiction*. His latest short story, "Your Brother, Who Loves You," appears in the anthology, *Philadelphia Noir*. Born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, he earned his BA and MA from Bucknell University. He has taught creative writing at Drexel University. Jim has been a contributor at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and is a graduate of The MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College in Asheville, North Carolina. He lives with his wife and son in Philadelphia's Art Museum Area.

Please Don't Fire Me For Saying Such Things

The cat was close to dead. The woman who belonged to it, Mrs. O'Leary, was a frazzled single soccer mom who didn't have time to bring it in earlier. (Like yesterday, when we could have actually done something.) Unlike the rest of the Stepford Wives in the town, her hair grayed at the temples and frizzies stood out from her ponytail. She still had the tracksuit though, another uniformed employee of the PTA. We saw a lot of them here at the animal clinic, women who plan their lives around their kids, their husbands, their power yoga sessions, and last their animals. I'm not one of those crazy PETA people who throw paint and free lab animals, but her cat would have been *so* handsome if it hadn't been such a bag of bones.

It really was a bag of bones too, lying there motionless on a blanket on the steel exam table, big vertebrae sticking out in a long line down its back like plates on the back of a stegosaurus. Its pelvis was a circus tent pole stuck forever at half mast, the thin orange striped canvas of the tent sloping down, down into the cat's deflated belly. Its eyes were green, or they could have been green, caked with mucous and staring off into space like forever. My Socratic mind went down the diagnosing tree. No visible wounds or punctures, no obviously broken bones, dull and dandruffed fur puffing off its side in clouds. Hyperthyroidism makes cats lose their fur and waste away to nothing, no matter how many cans of Friskies they bolt down. It would have snuck up on the cat slowly, a day and a second at a time, and his owners wouldn't have realized what was happening until things were on the triple black diamond slope, hurtling down to flat ground. Cats like to hide when they're sick, and what with the big soccer game coming up, Mrs. O'Leary wouldn't have realized things were really in the crapper until the last minute. She wouldn't have time to see the last time it ate or pooped or *looked* like a normal cat and not a picture in an anatomy book.

When taking a history it is important to pay attention to subconscious cues from the owner's body language and word choice. Mrs. O'Leary was curt and stone-faced in the waiting room, prickly

vibes of annoyance coming off of her in waves. Once in the exam room away from prying eyes, her demeanor changed. She sat on the wooden chair in the corner and hugged herself with arms ending in manicured fingernails. I asked the same old questions; What seems to be the problem with your cat today? How long has he been sick? She didn't meet my gaze, staring instead at her cat who lay like death on the table, but she answered, first in short sentences, then longer ones.

"I knew something was wrong with him when he stopped moving much yesterday, and he hadn't been himself for a long time, maybe a month or two? So I called right away and made an appointment for today because I was so worried about him. My husband thought I was crazy for wanting to take him in and told me that all you vets are just out to make loads of money, but I didn't care. He's been eating and drinking fine, but he's so skinny, I keep on trying to give him food that he likes, and he eats it all, but he's still so skinny. Of course, I was worried about him, I hope I did the right thing bringing him down when I did. Maybe I should have done it earlier? He hasn't been himself for months now.... I've had him since he was a kitten, and he's eight now. He's only come here, to this hospital, since I know you and trust you all, and I'm just so worried about him. He's just so tired and skinny, and I tried to help him, I really did..."

My hands danced around the cat as she spoke, taking and retaking a temperature, checking membranes and hydration and reflexes. He gave off the sickly sweet smell of organ failure, ketones and liver enzymes almost coloring the air in front of his mouth. Mrs. O'Leary grew more and more agitated as she told me about the cat, alternating between flailing hand gestures and quiet desperation. Her shrill North Shore Boston accent cut through the air, so uncertain and unused to being uncertain.

I didn't speak a lot while examining the cat. Mrs. O'Leary was talking enough for both of us and everything I found pointed to bad news. Deadly low temperature, barely responsive, eyes and nose streaming mucous, diarrhea stained tail, muscle loss *everywhere*. It was overwhelming. I should have interrupted her earlier, but she kept talking, the same words and worries in a tornado, and each second leaked away faster than the last. I did try to stay calm, but each tick of the clock in the small exam room said *Out. Of. Time*. I ran my hands over the cat as she talked, to comfort myself more than him. Each stroke brought with it a blizzard of fur, dull and fragile and full of static.

I made the mistake of learning his name, looking at his chart in hopes she would take a hint and let me speak. His name was Mac.

"But what do you think could have done this to him?" She finally asked me, having worked herself up by this time to pacing around the room. She wasn't asking that, though. The knot I could hear in her voice pleaded *Did I do this?*

I could have given her the shortlist; diabetes, renal failure, stroke, myocardial infarction, antifreeze poisoning... but I didn't. "Mrs. O'Leary, your cat is very sick, and we need to get the doctor to see him right away."

Her face melted in an instant, like she had been hoping that I would tell her nothing's wrong and that she could go home. "He is such a good cat. Such a good cat. I just want him to get better, that's all I want." She reached out a hand to touch him but stopped halfway, fingers trembling like leaves in the wind. I left her there, closed the door and ran to find the closest doctor.

I'd like to say that we were there just in time, and the cat lived for another ten happy years (as cats are wont to do). It's not to say that we didn't try.

The doctor admitted Mac to the hospital, and we slid a catheter into his chicken bone arm, down an angel hair thin vein with the smallest gage needle we could. When I asked how likely we were to save him, the doctor just shook her head. Warm lactated ringers and antibiotics can only do so much with a cat is in multiple organ failure and severe diabetic crisis. We covered him in heating pads and blankets and a shock dose of fluids and waited, which is always the worst part.

Mrs. O'Leary stayed there in the waiting room for five hours that day while we worked on her cat, leaving for only moments at a time to take a smoke or to make a call. We assumed it was her husband, as she always looked a little sadder when she came back. There comes a time when one stops seeing a cat as a cat and starts seeing him as the next grocery bill, the next orthodontist appointment, the next mortgage payment. It came sooner for Mr. O'Leary than for the Missus.

It was near closing time and \$931.67 later when the towel was thrown in. I don't know who made the call, but the doctor pointed at me and asked me to escort her and Mac into room three. It was quieter and more pleasantly decorated than our other exam rooms. We did many of our euthanasias there. Mac was just awake enough to protest when I disconnected him from his IV line and picked him up, a quiet

murmur of a meow. He might have licked my hand, though he could have just been drooling. I followed the doctor to the room so Frances (sometime over the course of the afternoon she stopped being Mrs. O'Leary) could say goodbye.

She smiled sadly when I walked in the room. "He was such a good cat. He was always there for me, always."

"And now you're here for him, just when he needs it," I told her, only slightly lying. The cat didn't need her now, three-quarters drugged and dying. He needed her a day, a week, a month ago when he was first getting sick. But to beleaguer the point now would be worthless and cruel, two things we tried to avoid in medicine.

The doctor didn't need me in the room when she gave the final injections, but I stayed anyway. Phenobarbital was first, two ccs of the milky solution down his catheter to make him sleep. The hot pink colored euthanasia solution that followed stung, or so said the doctor and the package the bottles came in. So it was more humane to sedate them first, not that Mac really needed it in his condition. I'd seen animals fight the solutions before- the german shepherd trying to crawl away from the doctor, nails rasping against the cold linoleum of the floor, the cat biting and scratching at the air, trying to kill invisible demons. Mac simply sighed, leaving a long and pregnant pause where the *breathe in* should have been.

The doctor slipped the buds of her stethoscope out of her ears and said *he's gone*. Frances nodded, tears seeping down her cheeks, and the doctor murmured things that she meant to be comforting about how he probably wasn't in much pain before he died. Much pain? Maybe not then. All the pain comes *before* dying. All the little pains accumulated over a lifetime wrapped up into a little bundle and tied with a grenade pin to go "pop" when pulled.

I knew it was only a matter of time before rigor mortis set in, which would make bagging him much harder. Muscle freezes in place once the body stops churning away with enzymes like the Hoover Dam, actin and myosin fibers locking in place (the ultimate embrace) and we wouldn't be able to move and maneuver Mac's legs into the optimum position for storage in the freezer until the muscle itself started decomposing. He was lying comfortably (like a corpse could be comfortable) on his side, spread out like butter on warm bread, which meant that his legs would probably poke out through the sides of the dead animal collection bag if he rigored.

Frances asked for a minute alone to say goodbye. We left, closing the door behind us with a click. I went to the front desk with all the intentions of filling out some paperwork but drifted back to the peephole in the door after only a few minutes. Frances had picked Mac up and was swaying there with him in her arms, mouth moving but with no sound audible through the thick wooden door. Her escaped hair formed a halo around her head and she looked so lost, like a small child in the rain. I stopped watching after that. There are some things that we see in a place like this that are private.

She left a few more minutes after that, makeup gone, face still slightly flushed and eyes shining. Tears are comprised of aqueous chloride salts excreted through ducts at the corners of the eyes. Humans are the only species on earth that cry when they are sad. Dolphins might, but they're already surrounded by aqueous salts, so who could tell? I smiled sadly at her, the same face I put on for every grieving animal owner. I meant it a little more this time. She paid her bill and left without another word, back straight and shoulders back like she had something to prove. She drove away slowly.

I scooped Mac up the moment that I was sure that she was gone. We had more appointments coming in, and we needed the exam room to be free of dead cat. I glanced down the hallway to make sure the coast was clear (it was) before I headed down into the guts of the hospital where owners weren't allowed.

It had been a big day for death. There was a corgi on the silver counter in the treatment room covered by a blanket. His parents owners weren't able to stomach coming in to say goodbye, to be seen in sorrow by so many strangers. They gave their consent to putting him down over the phone, and their voices were so broken. The dog had a bile duct obstruction secondary to stomach cancer. Its kidneys were shot, its liver was failing, its stomach wasn't moving, even before it died, and everything was connected where they shouldn't have been by this spiderweb of a tumor. The sheer mass of the tumor we only saw after it was dead, of course. The diagnosing doctor used the ultrasound machine to point out various anatomical irregularities, all of them, to the other doctors as a case study. In the old days they called it "professional interest," cutting the the recently deceased from guts to garters and peeking at the goodies inside like some deranged piñata. The ultrasound was much less bloody, less pain for all involved. No having to ask nasty questions of owners with gobby tears leaking out

their eyes. "Can we cut him up and see what *specifically* made him die?" Awkward. But this was only if the doctor would learn something that could help some other Fido down the road. Otherwise they left well enough alone.

Blood was more common than death, though both were popular options. Behind the closed doors, blood was everywhere. In the vomit of the dog with gastric ulcers, on the doctor in the back hacking off the head of a cat with maybes-rabies¹. We were mosquitos, drawing down blood through our metal proboscises. Hold down a vein and seduce a 22-gauge needle in, drawing back on a plunger with a sigh when the dark red blood ran in. Once collected, the blood ran from machine to machine like Disney Land. Electrolyte panel, blood smear, CBC-Chem, T4, hematocrit... all tests to see just how right or wrong the dog was. We all pulled for negatives, normals, no problems, but secretly in our hearts of hearts we wished for the positives, the yes-your-dog-has-[insert illness here] results, to see if we were right when we diagnosed on the fly. Sometimes. It was a fleeting emotion. More fleeting when the dog licked your hand and wagged its tail at you. A dog's saliva is cleaner in laboratory situations than human saliva, but that is not taking into account the very dog-like enjoyment of eating sticks and rocks and random animal excrement.

I walked past dogs and cats and techs and empty cages until I got to the kennel, where it was relatively quieter. Mac's bag was lying there on a table, named and labeled with paperwork spread out neatly alongside it. I set him down, still covered in the blanket he was carried in on. He was much less wooden than I thought he would be but still his joints creaked, crying out for an oil can they would never see. Freshly dead cats flowed like well greased hinges into their semi-final resting places, forming perfectly circular little loafs of meat and fur in a thick plastic bag, neatly tied with a tag.

Usually this whole process is a quick, time efficient affair. This time, I stopped. He looked the same as when he came in, big bones and baggy skin. I had seen a lot of dead animals in my day, and he was *still* like them, caught in that space between breathing out and breathing

1. It was already dead, don't worry. The Man demands a head and a pound of paperwork for every rabies scare. That's what the styrofoam coolers in the basement are for.

in. His eyes were open wide and clouding over like a rainstorm in summer, tongue paling even as I watched in the fluorescent lighting. Cat tongues are covered in thousands of papillae, little bristles like a fine-toothed comb that help in grooming, which lends to the sandpaper feel of a cat kiss. I wondered how many kitty kisses that tongue had given, how many mice eaten, how many hairs put painstakingly in place day after day after day.

I ran a hand over his head, across the dome of his skull (I could almost feel the sutures between parietal and occipital bones) and down the ridge pole of his spine, my thumb thumping over the spaces between his ribs. There can be no class that teaches this, the feel of a recently deceased being under your fingertips, the smells of active and passive and angry dying. All science and reason disappears after a while here in the animal hospital, when our patients leave in such numbers after so little a time. We do not cry at every loss or every win but duck our heads and work harder digging trenches. I am hardened but not frozen.

I apologized to Mac for his impossibly plebeian digs and with one last stroke from nose to ear tip, escorted him into the white bag. I curled him up as best I could, his joints hardening even as I moved and sealed the bag, wrapping the long excess with surgical tape going round and round. I tied a tag to the long handle that named him as he was in life and to ensure that he (or at least his ashes- we took for granted that they would be the same thing) would come back to us after baking at 1000 degrees for ten minutes. This is purely conjecture on my part. I don't know the whole recipe, just the finished product.

I would call his former mother when he came back in a small polished wooden box, and perhaps she would come back for him. I hoped she would. Maybe I would even be there when she would come in, and we would smile (hers wetter than mine) and remember him. I would not share my remembrances (I'm selfish that way). She might not share hers for fear of breaking the dam deep in her throat holding back the raging flood, but still I would hold the door open for the possibility.

JUDGE'S NOTES

Poetry Winner—"The Graterford Department of Corrections" by Joshua Aungst

The poet Sonia Sanchez said, "At some point, it is necessary, it is incumbent upon us to look and see as poets still poeting in the 21st century, how do I go out of my skin and return again with friends who will have something relevant to say?"

I imagine Sanchez's 21st century poet as medium/time traveler/cryptographer. 21st century poems that are divinations/travel guides/translations of other worlds.

This poem puts the planet of prison in view of our telescopes. The aliens are Atlases involved in a mighty spiritual endeavor every night. Their invisible metamorphoses are unraveled with a slow musical blush of imagery. The poem zooms beyond the bars and the prudent rhetoric and offers a transcendent angle on these "persons committed." Graterford inmates become monks in the hands of the poet.

Born in Germantown and raised in North Wales, Pennsylvania, **Yolanda Wisher** received a B.A. in English/Black Studies from Lafayette College and a M.A. in Creative Writing/Poetry from Temple University. In 1999, she was named the first poet laureate of Montgomery County. Her work has been published in the anthologies *Gathering Ground*, *The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South*, *The Fence Reader* and *Lavanderia*. She is a Cave Canem fellow, a Leeway Foundation Art and Change Award recipient, and the founder of the Germantown Poetry Festival. A radio host, musician, and former English teacher, Wisher is the Director of Art Education at the Mural Arts Program.

The Graterford Department of Corrections

"Our mission is to protect the public by confining persons committed to our custody in safe, secure facilities, and to provide opportunities for inmates to acquire the skills and values necessary to become productive law-abiding citizens, while respecting the rights of crime victims."

—Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Code of Ethics

Time taps his fingers like a somber caterpillar,
his twisting face mocks, *you will never get out of here.*

A shuddered heavy ringing burdens every breath and leaves
all sounds drowning in its incompleteness.

Quartz eyes are clouded by first impressions,
fossilized in skin and crooked depressions on foreheads.

Convicts swagger in hot creased brown paper bags stained
D.O.C. White shirts rest thumbs in belt loops, chests raised.

This prison pumps blood, pulsing like the twitch
of a city stuck inside itself, a heart tucked behind

a ribcage, waiting for rigamortis to tongue the body.
Inmates search for silence and bury their stories

in the worlds they carry on their shoulders.
And when all the cells are shut, no room for light,

they will set down that elephant planet of loss and marvel it,
waiting to hear from within, the turn of a prayer bead.

JUDGES' NOTES

55 Fiction Winner – “Laid Off Perceptions” by Nick Hanford

55 Fiction is an annual writing contest conducted by the New Times magazine where submissions must contain a setting, a conflict, at least one character, and a resolution all in 55 words or less. This year, the Ursinus Writing Center and *The Lantern* held their own 55 Fiction contest for the student body. This year's winner by Nick Hanford was chosen for its ability to capture such an active and dense moment in a mere 53 words. The judges agreed that his blunt and vivid portrayal of bar life set him apart from the others.

Laid-Off Perception

Adapting to termination feels like a spring river's thaw. Liquor warms tributaries. The bar's mirror fails its expansionist attempt, only adding layers of grime to the wretched place. Men behind me shout about trivialities. A fist flashes. Thuds emanate. Aggressor flees and victim unseen. Nonexistent to me now. Empty glasses are bigger problems.

Good-Night, Sweet Prince

What's done is done. The dinner table has been cleared. A few utensils are left sitting uncomfortably along with the salt and pepper shaker, an empty wine glass, and a few dirty napkins. Crumbs turn into jumping beans as soon as you try to sweep them up with your hand, always landing on the floor. The air smells of freshly snuffed candles. Louisa sits in the kitchen preparing the coffee and working on her daily crossword puzzle which she always does at this time. The television is on loud enough for a three-fourths deaf person to hear Alex Trebek's voice introducing contestants, "And this is a first ladies and gentlemen. Our next contestant, Mr. Marty Danahue, has worked for 20 years in the Rodent Control and Prevention. I bet you have some interesting stories with a job like that."

Rupert shuffles over to the dinner table. He knows that his wife will give him hell if he isn't at the table when she comes out with the food. He pulls back the wooden chair like a vacuum and scoots around to the left side of the chair. Rupert's right arm is a little bit stronger and he needs all his strength to lower his sagging body into the rickety chair. A dull buzz escapes between the cracks around the kitchen door and gets caught in the mustard light shining on the slightly wrinkled and dirty merlot colored tablecloth. But Rupert doesn't hear this. He couldn't hear it ten years ago. His arms lie on the table and the crumbs scratch away at the tissue paper thin skin of his forearms.

The sun is spreading through the hammock of trees outside, leaving the air relaxed and cool. The window by the table is wide, welcoming the sugary breeze in. Rupert fills his lungs and lets his eyes wobble around the room patiently. His feet tap against the hardwood floor like an anxious metronome. He probably forgot to take his pills this evening at cocktail.

Rupert picks up the utensils left on the table and walks into the kitchen where the dishes are all vibrating gently inside the dishwasher. The sink is still sweating from the hot water and the coffee pot is half full on the counter. The sugar and Drano sit like cousins between the two. The fan is spinning on the ceiling mixing the odors in the air. Louisa sits at the kitchen table with her almost-completed crossword puzzle. The center section of the block tiles is open. If she could only

figure out fourteen across, she is sure the whole puzzle would be completed. Rupert's pill case lies outstretched next to a tall glass of water. The case has seven little compartments labeled M-Su. The pocket is open at the moment holding two round red circular pills, one chalk yellowy square pill, and a large white oval shaped pill.

"Is dinner almost ready?" Rupert asks.

"You forgot your pills again didn't you?" Louisa is fixated on the crossword puzzle at the table.

"I don't remember. I remember that I took my lunch pills."

"Here they are Rupert." She drops two pills in Rupert's hand.

"Are we going to eat dinner soon?"

"We already ate."

"Could I have that glass of water?" Rupert takes his pills and sets down the utensils and empty wine glass. "I'm not hungry anyway. I'm going to go watch the rest of Jeopardy."

"I'll be in as soon as I finish my crossword."

"Alright." Rupert turns like a penguin and with a great push propels forward and keeps his momentum out the door.

Louisa is worried about Rupert. She doesn't know how much longer she will be able to take care of him. If she dies before he does, he would have no chance. Rupert would forget how to open a door if his hand didn't pull the knob out of instinct. He can't seem to remember anything she tells him, for instance, he bought crystallized Drano instead of the Liquid Plumr like Louisa asked him to get five minutes beforehand. Louisa is convinced that Drano is not nearly as effective as Liquid Plumr. He keeps forgetting things all the time, even though the medicine is supposed to help with that. Louisa has been especially anxious because Blue Cross has been hassling her for an updated A4-F12 medical claim form for his medicine, but she was sure that she had sent it in months ago.

The house isn't doing so well either. It has about as many problems as Rupert does. She is convinced Rupert is going to hurt himself one of these days trying to fix it up. He always insists on doing everything himself and he just can't do it anymore, he shouldn't have been doing it ten years ago. Rupert is like the stubborn raccoon, no matter how many times he fails to avoid the trap, he always ends up falling from the trash can into the cage below. They should move, but don't. Rupert wouldn't be able to situate himself into a new house at this point and they don't really have enough money to move anyway.

They never had any children because Rupert is sterile. Although they both wanted kids when they had gotten married, they quickly came to accept their situation. They said they only needed each other, and for so long this was true.

"Louisa, are you coming, you're missing Jeopardy."

"What?" Louisa calls back.

"You're missing Jeopardy."

"I'll be right in."

"What about the bright red bin?"

"NO. I'LL BE RIGHT IN!"

"Well hurry up. You're missing the whole first round," Rupert strains.

"Oh. I'll be in in a moment, hold your horses."

"WHAT?"

"HOLD YOUR HORSES WILL YOU!"

The coffee has almost finished percolating. It sounds like a child trying to suck every drop of soda out of a big plastic cup with a straw. Louisa gets up and makes her way over to the cabinet. She opens it up and pulls out a rather large white porcelain mug with a blueprint of the Globe Theatre on it. She fixes herself a cup of coffee, her eyes still staring down at her crossword.

Fourteen across: Hamlet killer. Louisa and Rupert saw this play, but it was so long ago. Hamlet was a strange play as she remembers. She tries to remember which play that was, was it the one about the King who went crazy? Or was it the one with the three witches? All of Shakespeare's plays seem to run together. Each one is about some king who ends up killing someone and then getting killed. The coffee is hot and she pulls away as soon as the hot liquid touches her pursed lips. She places the mug back down on the table. She misses the taste of coffee. The doctor keeps saying taste may come back to her, but it's been almost two years now since her stroke. She says she should stop putting so much sugar in the coffee since she can't taste the sweetness of it anyway. And with Rupert's old age, he can barely taste a thing either.

"Rupert." There is no answer. "Rupert!...RUPERT!"

"Whaaat?" His voice cracks.

"Do you remember the play Hamlet?"

"What about a grape sandwich?" Rupert asks back.

"No. HAMLET. THE PLAY HAMLET. DO YOU

REMEMBER?"

"Oh, Hamlet. Vaguely."

"Do you know how he died?"

"Did I show who my pie? What pie are you talking about?"

"No. DIE. DIE. HAMLET DIED." She shouts at the door.

"Oh, yes, I'm sure it was a surprise."

"HAMLET DIES. HOW DOES HE DIE?"

There is a moment of silence, then the door cracks open just enough for Rupert's head to poke through. "I'm sorry, I can't quite hear you out there," Rupert says.

"Do you have your hearing aid in?"

"Yes."

"Is it turned on?"

"I think so."

"You go back and watch some more Jeopardy." Rupert walks back out to the living room. "Maybe they will have a Shakespeare category tonight," she says to herself and looks about the room, trying to find her answer in the old grandfather clock that only ever reads 3:24. She rises and walks over to the counter again. She stares out the back window and notices their porch light is out. She knows that Rupert is going to want to fix it; however that would involve him standing on a ladder many feet up in the air. She continues to stare and pours another cup of coffee. With her mug in hand and crossword under her arm, she walks out of the kitchen.

"I just can't seem to recall how he died?" Louisa asks just as loud as before.

"How who died?"

"Hamlet, you know," Louisa says with raised eyebrows making her forehead wrinkle up like a raisin.

"Was he the one who went crazy and killed his daughters?"

"No, Hamlet didn't go crazy and kill his daughters, stupid."

"Sure he did."

"No," Louisa says, "That was another play." They both stare at the television screen. "Wait, it's starting to come back to me now. Hamlet was supposed to be king, but the throne was taken."

"Unh-huh. And the witches do the double, double, toil and trouble bit right?"

"No. That was *Macbeth*, I remember that," Louisa snips.

"I cannot tell what the dickens his name is. Who was Hamlet

then?"

"He was supposed to be king but he was usurped by someone and his mother marries his uncle I think. Then everybody dies," she says.

"I think everyone always dies at the end of Shakespeare."

"Only the tragedies." They both stare at the television again and neither speaks for a moment. "Do you remember the play now?"

"Yes, I think I remember it now." Rupert's eyes are shining.

"Do you remember how Hamlet died?"

"I think he was stabbed."

"That's what I thought too, but it doesn't fit in the boxes. I am looking for a six letter word. If I can figure this one out, the whole crossword is really going to open up for me."

"Hmmp. I'm pretty sure he was stabbed." Rupert crosses his arms.

"Well it doesn't fit in the boxes. Stabbed is too long." Louis glares over at him.

"Oh well, it will come to us eventually."

Alex Trebek declares the start of Double Jeopardy and Rupert turns up the volume a few notches. Louisa's eyes look a bit dazed as she sits and watches.

Louisa begins to feel a bit queasy. She must have put too much sugar in her coffee; it is more of an automatic action now, she doesn't even think about it. She thinks again that she should cut down on the sweets. She is worried she may end up diabetic, and she could never trust Rupert to give her a shot. Her head feels light. She remembers the coffee pot and wonders whether she turned it off or not. She thinks she did but she can't be sure and doesn't want to spoil the rest of her coffee. She is about to push herself up off of the couch when a commercial for the Scooter Store flips on to the television screen.

Louisa turns to Rupert and says, "You know, you're going to need one of those soon."

"Me? No, I don't need one of those." Rupert waves his hand.

"You can't walk so well, even with your cane. We should really go get you one."

"I don't need one."

"For you and I are past our dancing days, Rupert. If you fall over and can't get up, I'm not going to be able to help you," she says harshly.

"I won't fall over then."

"Nothing will come of nothing. You are going to need it to get around, why do you have to be so stubborn about this sort of thing? It's okay to need a little help sometimes." Her voice is tender but firm.

"The lady doth protest too much, methinks."

"We'll talk about this later." Louisa gets up and goes out to the kitchen.

Rupert still sits entranced. His lips are moving but no sound is coming out. He stands and walks over to the bathroom.

In the kitchen Louisa sits down at the table and picks up her crossword puzzle. Her eyes slowly shut and pop open while she tries to concentrate on the page.

Jeopardy has returned from commercial. The toilet flushes and Alex says, "Beth you have control of the board, pick a category."

"I'll take Foods in Translation for 600."

"This is the German word for Cheese."

Beep, "What is käse, Alex."

"That is correct, pick again."

"Foods in Translation for 800."

Beepboopnboosh, "And there's the other daily double for tonight. You have \$12,200, how much would you like to wager?"

"Let's make it a true Daily Double."

"Alright, that will put you in the lead if you answer this correctly. Here's the question, this French word means fish."

Beep Beep Beep. The dishes are clean and Louisa begins to walk over to the dishwasher but notices the coffee pot sitting on the counter. She wonders if she forgot to turn it on so she starts over to the counter but before she gets there she sees that the milk is out and on the table. She switches directions again and heads toward the milk when she notices that the window is open and the cool breeze has left her skin goose pimpled. She heads toward the window, but just before she reaches out to close the windows she sees the crossword puzzle lying open on the table. She sits down, she still feels a bit ill. Fourteen across: Hamlet killer. She tries to remember if he was the one who was betrayed by his council and was killed by Brutus, but she can never remember the difference in Shakespeare's plays.

"Poison!" Rupert erupts and his old body bursts through the kitchen door. "Hamlet was stabbed by a sword that had poison on it. We were right, he was stabbed, but the poison killed him." His hand is

raised in the air and he smiles widely at Louisa, whose head is against the table. The room still smells of coffee and Drano. This is the long and short of it.

Visiting Room: Lewis Considers the Time & Space Continuum

Those colossal eyes turned like a pinwheel. His heart beat,
smothered under excuses and a milky layer of hope.
When I asked if he'd ever considered using razor wire
as a necklace, he said no but that he'd considered the idea of it.
The space between his eyes twitched like an insect wing,
a dying beetle writhing in a smothering sonic shock.

Every action has an equal reaction, someone once said.

He stood up to leave, but his shoes moved backwards
and crawled up the wall. After he attached to the ceiling,
he began to drip like an icicle, until only his inner wick remained.
He asked for a light and said, you can't imagine what time feels like
when it sticks between your teeth and gums. Very hard to swallow
what I have to say, try gnawing on it for a few years.

String

It's happening again
In the midst of frivolous breadth.
I am the machine
My nature clenches like a fist.
I thicken
Like old wood.
Crystallize
Like honey
In the pantry for too long.
My words knot
From the strain of thirst.
I shrink
Become my smallest self.
The golden
It's happening again
I can feel the thick edges of myself streamlining
Crunching into diamond-pressure efficiency
As the hectic hours fall into place.
I can feel the soft
Petals of my peace go
Crisp and crumble away.
I am the machine.
And any dark day on the horizon is my day.
I am no longer pleasant to be or be around
Accolades accomplishments accreditations
Are plentiful in this, my platinum orchard
All extraneous clippings have been tucked away,
Ticked off with editing ink.
I am pulled tight like a violin string
I am embedded in brick tone of E.

The Tale of Lad Wadley

Among the Smug-Smigglies
It is commonly told
The tale of Lad Wadley
A boy, now grown old.

He rose from his sleep
On the eighth day of the week
And with some discontent
He said just what he meant:

"I am sick," he so said,
"Of being just me.
And so I'll be someone else,
Just you wait and see."

So he tromped out his hole
Marking not where he tread.
And he tromped to the woods
Without a thought in his head.

He soon found a squamfizzle
Which are quite hard to miss,
And he noticed its bowl-branches—
They were housing frem fish!

Rare, it was not, for such fish to be
Up in the bowl-branches of a squamfizzle tree.
But Lad Wadley, so young, had not seen such a sight,
So he jumped and he smiled and exclaimed with some might,

"I shall be like this tree, if it's all that I am!"
So he grew his tuffs brown and he held up his hands,
"I shall be so sturdy, I shall be so strong!"
And he was like the squamfizzle tree before long.

Then Lad Wadley stood there,
And he stood there quite steady.
He waited... waited...waited...
Then yelled out, "I'm *READY!*"

But no frem fish came down
From their squamfizzle trees,
They just stared at Lad Wadley
As he swayed in the breeze.

Until one fremmite spoke,
His name was Ram Khii,
And he said to Lad Wadley,
"Young smug, don't you see?"

"You cannot be like the squamfizzle trees
For they hold our water, which is what we need.
You cannot accomplish this act by yourself,
We are sorry, but please, find your place somewhere else."

Confustered and swabbled
Lad Wadley tromped on,
On through Jen-Shmek's tunnel
And across Miss Vry's lawn.

Soon out of the forest
He didn't stop there—
He skimmed past What's Known
And well beyond Nowhere.

By the time he looked up,
He looked up *just* in time
To keep himself from tromping
On a mexu grek-kryne!

"Excuse me," said Su-Ee
(for that was his name)
"But my burrow's been tromped on
and *YOUR* Smiggle-ly foot is to blame!"

"I'm sorry!" squawked Wadley,
but he secretly thought,
*"Here's my chance to be helpful
and useful as I ought!"*

So he twisted and twurned
And he said, "As best I can:
I will act as your home
And your shade on this sand."

The mexu grek-kryne scuttled forward and back
then he stretched his legs straight only to fall with a *PLAP!*
"Lad Wadley!" he said, "Young Smug, you are kind,
but one can't simply *be* a home—it's something you find,

Mine's not made of foots, hands,
Or Smug-Smiggly tuffs;
Thank you much, Wadley,
But enough is enough.

It's clear to us both
Where you mustn't be,
Not the forest, nor the beach,
So walk on and leave me."

Drumgrundled and trumdied
Lad left in a huff
While he dragged both his feet
And kicked rocks, cans, and stuff.

In such a huff was he
That he didn't even see
Where he walked when he tromped
Right down into the sea.

He soon found a school
Of waffel-kluf fish
And he eagerly begged,
"I promise I'll do whatever you wish:

Just let me be helpful
I want to prove my worth!
For a useless Smug-Smiggly
Might as well be a quiffer-querf!”

Then, as a group,
All the waffel-kluf replied
With a wondrous sound
That no waffel-kluf could hide:

“We’ve thought long and hard
About what we would do
If someone as willing and kind
Showed up as you...”

“Yes!” yelped Lad Wadley
“Yes! Say what you’d like!

How about a boat or pop?
Or a flini float or a green-toed sock?
No! Shoes! Yes! Yes! Shoes!
That’s what waffel-kluf need!

Or maybe a song to hear
Or a book to read
Or a team to cheer for when *they’re* in the lead!

Or a steak!
No! A rake!
No! A ship
Fully equipped...

With a bike for a hike
And a key for a door
And a kite that’s quite light
And whatever you want more!”

Exhausted and breathless
Lad Wadley breathed deep
As he took in as much air
As that Smug's lungs could keep

And he stood straight again
And he held his chin high...
...Until...the waffel-kluf said, "No."
Then Lad Wadley asked, "Why?"

"You see, little Wadley, there's nothing we need.
As you've probably noticed, we live in this sea,
It gives us what we need—*just* enough.
So anything more would be junk-stuff.

This ocean is small
And although it's bizarre,
Whatever we want
is never too far."

The Smug left the sea,
Now saddened and gloomy,
And he looked up to the sky
And thought, "*That's MUCH more roomy.*"

So he stretched out his tum-pluff
And he stripped his feet bare
And with one impressive leap
He leaped into the air.

He was right: there's room there.
And he said with great tact,
"This is an air ocean:
like the sea un-compact."

Then he spotted a flock of dver-chordas flying by
And he timed his fall *just right* to land on one's thigh.
In surprise, the dver-chorda (his name Alakameer)
Warned, "Careful, Smug-Smiggly! You don't belong here!

You have your land feet—
Your land hands and land toes—
You best not try flying:
Stick with what you know.”

Alakameer had a point
But this point poked at Lad Wadley.
As he jumped off the dver-chorda
He fell back down quite sadly.

“I just don’t get it! I don’t understand!
I’m a Smug-Smiggly who’s not part of the land,
And if I can’t be of beach or of ocean or sky...
WHO AM I??”

As he sat down quite troubled
The waffel-kluf appeared,
Followed by Ram Khii,
Su-Ee, and Alakameer.

They gathered round Lad Wadley—
They closed in real near—
And they told that Smug-Smiggly
Just what we all need to hear:

“That’s for *YOU* to decide!
We know what *WE* do,
See, you were looking to be like us when
You should be looking for you!

It might not be easy,
In fact, it’s quite hard,
And most-likely you’ll travel
In many directions quite far.

But you *will* keep on looking—
If you keep your eye on your star—
For you must see who you’re *not*
Before you find out who you *are*.”

The Devout

Together we bow our heads in unison when in crisis, screaming that the chaos that happened before was just fake.

Hot-dog vendors, business men, soccer moms, stay at home dads, absent fathers, lonely grandmothers, bruised wives. All bowing their heads for salvation when the statue crumbles and the sea starts to run after us.

I smell gasoline says the man with a thousand noses as a subway car runs over him. He now turns into a thousand sparks...flying into a burnt sky.

It wants to rain, but I don't think it can. He wants to cry, but he doesn't know how. She wants to run, but can't. They want to leave but where is there to go?

Stale bread and sour milk is the regular. Don't bother complaining. Just swallow fast enough to not even taste it. Nutritional facts on the side of the container mean nothing. People's words cannot be trusted.

In lonely corners is the only solace, far from any potential danger. But there aren't many, so hurry. Hurry up to do nothing.

Together we bow our heads like ashamed toddlers who know they have done wrong. Thou shalt not covet. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not....pow! Another dead. The flower power is strangled in guitar strings that used to play songs of peace. Now, red white and blue. Blue skies. Blue faces. Red bodies. Millions of them in piles. They are not stacked alphabetically, so good luck finding yours.

Loan-raked students, desperately poor elderly, elitist elephants and donkeys, radical liberals, homeless. All bowing their heads looking for an answer to sleep well at night.

Leather Pleather. Helter Skelter. Mama Mia. The Broadway sparkle. The Wall Street corruption. The White House confusion. Is there anything worth fighting for? Four things: male female. Good bad. Male good. Female bad.

Blame it on the alcohol. Mr. Jones the gentleman is dead. Can it be? Let it be.

You be the little blue man and I'll be the little pink girl. Should we have kids? Yes. Twins. Boys, to carry on the name. Let's play. But I forgot

whose turn it is?
Cheating is the name of the game.
Together we bow our heads.
Lord be with you, Christ be with you, Lord be with you.
Go now in the glory of the Lord and spread peace to all.
And with that a congregation of millions step out to find the world in
ruins. Covered in ash and blood and tar. They were too late. The sun
disappeared. Flowers froze. Music broke.
The day the world died from the devout.

Femina Irata

"I would be lying if I said that my anger had taught me how to live. But my life has changed because of it. I think I am becoming in many small ways **a woman who takes no shit...**"

~Sally Kempton

I remembered *drowning*. Some invincible childhood moment long ago forgotten. I leapt off the pool's edge, into the deep end, and out of sight. My nine-year-old body, lost to the water; my lungs, useless against the pressure; my stubborn heart, pounding in my ears. I waited to swim, but instead I sank, the blurry world above fading fast as I fell into the nothing, into the silence, paralyzed.

I had watched both my older sisters slink into the water countless times, small waves swallowing up their curves to leave only their smiling faces, happy buoys bobbing along the surface. They called my name. *But I can't swim*. My tentative toes dared to advance just an inch. The water quaked into a fit of ripples beneath my touch and for a split second, I could imagine the concrete floor, eight feet below. Again, they called out to me. *I just can't stand here*. I envied them. They were mermaids with beautiful and exciting grown-up lives and I felt more like a guppy, impossibly small, forever the baby. Like the rope that sectioned off the kiddie pool from the deep end, the decade that separated me from my sisters made my longing to be, do, feel, and see everything their way an impossible dream. But that never stopped me from trying. *I will be tall, too, someday*. Just jump in, the happy buoys shouted, laughing at their little guppy sister, a sunburned mess of blonde curls shivering, awkward in a frilly one piece. So I jumped. And I've been jumping ever since.



I was born to my pleasantly surprised thirty-eight-year-old mother and forty-two-year-old father, but I was raised by a sea of women, most of whom I would never meet. To me, they existed solely through stories told and retold, drifting leaves from a family tree rooted in oral tradition, pressed and preserved for me, my sisters, and our someday daughters.

They lost everything. My great, great grandmother Catherine

Brady left County Meath, Ireland with her husband and son, but came ashore alone with only her child's lifeless body tucked away in a suitcase, her baby spared from burial at sea. She never gave up on her new life in America and eventually remarried.

They fell in love. Catherine's daughter, Alice, caught the eye of her husband while dancing on a Philadelphia street corner. The happy couple brought six beautiful daughters into the world, one of whom would become my grandmother.

They worked for their families. Catherine McDevitt crossed social boundaries with grace and aplomb to find happiness as a working woman. She discovered a kindred spirit in Michael Boyle, an industrious man whose mother, Susan Gavin, made the ocean voyage between Ireland and the U.S. several times, shepherding timid women onto American soil. Like her mother, Catherine loved to dance, and she never stopped dancing up until the day she died. She left behind my newlywed mother who, for my sisters and me, would become the culmination of these women, the beating heart that keeps their stories alive.

All of my life, I have watched these women move in my mother. For thirty-two years, they have ridden the morning train with her from our suburbia home to her Philadelphia job. Catherine McDevitt pours through my mother's fingers as she takes dictation from a lawyer of questionable sanity, her hands flying at speeds of over two-hundred words per minute. "I am sharp as a tack in that office," she reminds me and my sisters from time to time, as if we could ever forget.

At five o'clock, she is home, dancing with Alice to *Annie Get Your Gun*. Singing over a cutting board in the kitchen, my mother is no longer a legal secretary but a gun slinging Annie Oakley. "A man never trifles with girls who carry rifles. Ohh, you can't get a man with a gun!" As a kid, I lived for these ritual transformations of our kitchen into the Wild West, a make believe world that trumped the recess yard where the girls were mean and the boys had cooties. After a particularly tough school day, my mom would take my hands and we would stomp our cowboy boots through the tumbleweeds. "Oh a man may be HOT but he's NOT when he's SHOT!" She would spin me around for the big finish. "No, you can't get a man with a gun!"

My mother raised her three daughters with the commitment of Catherine Brady, the audacity of Susan Gavin, and the spirit of Alice and Catherine McDevitt. I watched as first Katie and Betsy, ten and

twelve years older than me, earned the pride, grace, and independence of the women who walked before us. From an early age, I knew ours is a brand of feminism brave enough to traverse the Atlantic, to sacrifice for family, to love endlessly. But it would take me years to understand how to own myself, to develop the autonomy that once compelled an Irishwoman to leave her home, step onto a ship, and cross an ocean. I had to learn to swim before I could set sail.



Principal George Stratts pressed a ruler against my thigh, cold metal sending goose bumps down my knee socks. "An inch and a half," he muttered, as if the length of flesh between the hem of my skirt and the top of my knee cap was some unspeakable atrocity. With wrinkly jowls weighing down on every syllable, the man we called the Bull Dog eyed me over like an emaciated alley cat: homeless, insignificant, lunch.

He handed me a demerit slip and hot tears simmered behind my glasses. Not because an inch and a half of leg had just desecrated my pristine discipline record. But because a man had been looking at me long enough to decide that I was showing too much of my body. I felt violated. I felt *angry*.

There is a certain painful irony that oozes from the words "Catholic School Girl." For female students, Catholic high school was not a period of growth, of maturation, but a perpetual girlhood. Completely de-sexed by our uniforms, we were forced into a single androgynous consensus, a mass of lanky boys with long hair. Boxy kilts hid any hint of hip in plaid; stiff waistbands rejected the notion of curves; thick knitted cardigans on top of high collared blouses did away with breasts altogether. The square inch of knee our stockings left naked was scandalous enough. Our bodies were dangerous, lustful threats to society. To the vulnerable young men who had the luxury of walking the hallways in cotton trousers, we were Jezebels just waiting to happen.

Perpetual girlhood meant perpetual naïvety. Just as quickly as we buttoned back our breasts, the topic of sex was brushed under the carpet. Health and theology textbooks cross-referenced each other to conclude that our bodies are the Lord's temples.

One afternoon in Theology, I made the mistake of contesting this fact of life.

"What do you mean, our bodies are *his* temples?" I hadn't even

raised my hand.

Deacon Vadino stared me down and I immediately felt like Mary Magdalene, waiting for the inevitable stoning. "Your bodies are the Lord's temples. They are to be kept pure and clean. I don't understand what is so confusing about that."

"So...you are saying that I am not my own person?"

"As a *Catholic*," Deacon was a portly man who rarely gathered the momentum to leave his desk, and the emphasis that fell over these loaded words resounded like a warning bellowed from the depths of his belly. "You must commit your body, mind, and spirit to God."

"And what exactly does that entail?"

"It entails abstinence. It entails purity in your thoughts and actions. It entails dressing appropriately, not showing too much skin. It entails..."

"...moderation?" I met his glare. *Let be who is without sin cast the first stone...*

There was an empty seat in class. I had not known the name of the girl who usually sat there until she became gossip whispered across cafeteria tables. "Pregnant" was the final verdict. My heart sank. For a second, I wished she had known that her body is a temple.

That was the day I forgot about Alice McDevitt dancing on the street corner. I forgot about Annie Oakley loading her rifle. Standing somewhere between nun and slut, I lost my confidence in what it means to be a woman. I stopped calling myself a feminist. I felt my identity being washed away.



Senior year, I was given the opportunity to step out of my plaid kilt and into the real world. I would spend half my day sitting in high school, holding my tongue through Theology. But after lunch, I would peel away the layers of my uniform in the ladies' room, pull on a pair of jeans and maybe even a fitted t-shirt, then carpool with my best friend to St. Joseph's University. We were awarded a scholarship that covered two college courses per semester. It was a taste of freedom unlike anything we Catholic school girls had ever experienced.

So when he approached me for the first time, I figured he had to have mistaken me for an *actual* college student. We were standing in a hallway, waiting for the class before ours to finish.

He moved to stand next to me. "Why don't you smile more often?" He was tall, dark, and broad, though not necessarily handsome.

He sat across from me in Sociology and I could tell he thought himself to be suave. I estimated that he had to be at least twenty-one-years-old, which seemed like a lifetime away from my seventeen.

I laughed coyly and shrugged, because that is what girls do.

"There it is!" He leaned one shoulder against the wall, his arms folding across his chest. He watched me from this stance and my cheeks burned. I felt like a little girl again, standing next to my first crush, shuffling my feet on the playground. It wasn't that I was attracted to him. In fact, his arrogance at once repulsed me and made me feel small. But here was an adult, a *man*, who wanted to talk to *me*. Finally, I thought. *Here, I am a grown woman.*

"My name's Rosie." I forced myself to speak, if only to end his silent observation.

"I'm James," he did not offer his hand but instead took mine from my side.

"It's, uh," I was incapable of making eye contact with him, a fault he would later criticize. "It's nice to meet you."

After class ended, he would grab my shoulder as I made my way to the door. "Hey!" I almost fell over. "Could I, uh...have your number?"

I steadied myself on the doorframe. *My what?* No one had ever asked me for my digits. This was not covered in the Catholic curriculum. I giggled, again, clueless. It was sickening. "Listen, James...I have a boyfriend." It was true, but he bent over, laughing. *Why is that so unbelievable?* My face turned fire engine red. I stole a step backwards, hoping to escape this conversation.

"Wait, wait..." he composed himself and took hold of my elbow. I was trapped. "I am only asking because I might need help with the homework sometime. I mean, you're smart, Rose." Only my family and my boyfriend call me Rose. I consider it a term of endearment, but on his lips it sounded more like a come on.

"Is it okay if I call you Rose?"

No, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, *no it is not okay*. Nothing about this situation seemed okay to me. And nothing can explain what happened next.

"Yeah, yeah it's okay." He pulled out his cell phone and I gave him my number. He would only ever call me one time.

□□

Finals week at St. Joe's fell in the middle of a snowy December.

Craving coffee after a late night spent cramming, I walked towards the cafeteria, shivering, my hands buried in my coat pockets. My breath escaped in clouds and I realized I was mouthing Hail Marys. Twelve rounds of Catholic schooling had transformed me into quite the heathen, but I was desperate. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you...*

Then my phone vibrated. It was James. *Holy Mary, Mother of God.*

I let it go to voicemail. But he called me again. I stopped just short of the cafeteria, closed my eyes, and answered. "Hello...?"

"Rose!" I grimaced. "It's James. Come to the Social Sciences building. A bunch of us are having a last minute study session." *A bunch of us.* It sounded innocent enough, and in a group situation, I could easily distance myself from him. "We could use some of your genius."

"Okay!" I listened to myself accept the invitation. "I'll be right over." I forgot about the coffee.

Campus was a ghost town. Students who weren't taking finals at the time we're either holed up in their dorms, studying, or holed up in their dorms, drinking. But when I rounded the corner before the entrance to the Social Sciences building, he was standing there, waiting. For me.

Something was wrong. My feet were suddenly glued to the sidewalk.

"Hey! Rose!" I wanted to turn around, to walk away. *Go get that coffee.* "Oh, um, hey, James." *Go.*

"Come on, already!" He started laughing, that same cackle that made my skin crawl the day we met. "What is it? Exam week jitters?" I shook it off. *You're crazy, I told myself. You're just tired. You could use the review anyway.*

I did not remember moving my feet, but I must have, because now we were standing inside the building.

"So, uh, where is this little study party?" I cracked a nervous smile.

"Rose, listen..." He turned towards me. I felt his hand against the crook of my left elbow. "I have feelings for you." My jaw fell, but the words did not come.

"You don't have to say anything," he grinned. My stomach churned.

"I...I wanted to grab some coffee... I'll, uh..." It was too late.

He gripped both of my elbows and pushed my back against a wall. I was pinned; my skinny arms were useless. His mouth planted on mine was a muzzle. It was then that I realized no one was going to save me. *Campus is a ghost town.*

His hands. His hands fell over my abdomen. Then my breasts.

My thoughts rushed. He looked into my eyes, and I remembered. *Drowning.*



Four years earlier, I was sitting in an eighth grade classroom.

"Rape," a strange man began from behind a podium, brandishing a Barbie doll, "is not a one way street." My Catholic elementary school had paid this guy to talk to us about sexual violence.

"Tell me, why might this girl find herself in an *unwanted sexual situation*?" He lifted Barbie over his head, his thumb and index finger wrapped around her slender waist. She was clad in a midriff-baring tank top, a shiny pleather skirt, and fishnets. I imagined him sitting down to dress Barbie that morning, thumbing through a miniature clothes rack, meticulously choosing a tiny handbag to match her plastic heels.

"Come on, you know the answer!" He was losing his patience, until at last one of the boys raised a timid hand. "Yes! You in the back!"

"Um, because she's like...not wearing a lot of clothes?"

"Exactly! She's *asking* for it!"

That Christmas, I was chosen to portray the Blessed Virgin in our parish's nativity scene. I sat on the altar, draped in royal blue, a veil on my head, a real live baby Jesus in my lap. As the organ piped out "Silent Night," Sister Barbara Jude snapped at me from the sacristy, "Rosemary, for goodness' sake, cross your legs!" Much to her dismay, I had been sitting before our entire parish, knees opened. I looked down at the infant savior, fast asleep in my arms. There was no way I could shift my legs without waking him up. *Mary would have chosen a nap for Jesus over being ladylike.*

I chose to stay put, but I looked over at Joseph and could not help but wonder if I was asking for it.



James was relentless. "Don't try to resist, Rose." *Your body.* "Just give in. You know you feel the same way." *His temple.* I thrashed beneath his weight. *She came to shore alone.* I felt my hands ball into fists. *She never gave up.* I closed my eyes and screamed.



Finally, I had stopped sinking. The world around me fell into a hushed slow motion. Eight feet underwater felt like twenty thousand leagues under the sea. I closed my eyes as my tailbone brushed the concrete floor. Somewhere, someone was calling my name. Two hands hooked under my arms and dragged me up, up and away, back into the blurry world above the surface. I opened my eyes and I gasped, grateful to fill my lungs once more.

"Rose, are you alright?!" Both of my sisters hoisted me back onto the edge of the pool. I nodded, catching my breath. "We're sorry," Betsy apologized, her eyes filled with concern. "You will learn how to swim eventually," Katie promised.

She was right. Their guppy sister would become a mermaid, too. Someday.



"My God, Rose, What is *wrong* with you?" I opened my eyes to find James standing, disoriented, five feet in front of me.

"What is wrong with me?" My heart raced to catch my breath; my hands clenched tight at chest level. "What is *wrong* with *me*?"

"I thought this was what you wanted. Why are you so *angry*?"

My knuckles turned white as an endless list of answers twisted through every fiber of my being: Because I never *wanted* this. Because I never *asked* for this. Because my education had told me that my only option as a woman was to live my life as a temple, as a social structure, helplessly rooted to the ground, stoic archways standing vulnerable.

But I left the question to hang in the air and instead stormed off to my final exam. I would finish the class with a B+.



Months later, I was sitting in my high school Latin class. It was the day before Spring break, and Mr. Peters was keeping us busy with word searches.

"Has anyone found '*femina irata*'?" Mr. Peters chirped from his desk, trying his best to keep us engaged. We were restless in our seats, fidgeting with plans for the week of freedom.

"Someone, anyone, point me towards an *angry woman*." I watched as my classmates turned around in unison to look at me. We burst into laughter. I had earned myself a new nickname.

That afternoon, waiting on the corner for the bus home, I smiled and I remembered Alice. *Dancing*.

Thank You For Shopping

She was high and anxious to sail away. A plastic kiddie pool and an inflatable mattress sat in her shopping cart. Pock marks lining the crooks of her elbows seethed beneath the unforgiving fluorescent lights. Dried crimson scales clung to her sallow flesh, souvenirs from a trip that had ended too soon.

"I swear to fuckin' Christ, I am going to barf. Can you please just give me my change?!"

Her hair fell in a single layer of thin, copper bristles. A ratty Grateful Dead t-shirt drooped from her empty collarbone like a dress on a wire hanger. Some ungodly seamstress had pieced her together, haphazardly stitching limbs into place, threading muscle and sinew through a rusted needle. But the job was left unfinished and the sick rag doll had wandered into Kmart, her button eyes wild and bloodshot.

"God, I need to get the fuck out of here..." She had strewn her cash in wads across the counter top. My clammy hands trembled as I straightened out each bill, counting then recounting, losing my place every time she lost her patience.

"D-d-do you have a shoppers' re-re-rewards card...?" My manager was breathing down my neck. It was the first hour of my first day flying solo on the first cash register I had ever touched. I already wanted to cry.

"A wha...? No! I don't get no 'rewards.'" She threw her skinny arms into the air and her fists slammed down against the counter. "Je-sus Christ, I am going to throw up..."

Lost for words, I regurgitated the scripted customer service shtick drilled into my memory that summer. "W-would you like, would you like to sign up for..."

"Did you not hear me?! I *said* I need to get the *fuck* out of here!"

"I...I heard you, I'm just..."

"Just give me my damn change!"

My shaking hands rattled against the keys. "Right, your change is..." Suddenly, the register's screen blinked off. I must have pushed some fatal button. *No, this is not happening...*

"M'am, I'm so sorry, I..." But when I turned to apologize, the ruined ragdoll had vanished, my sweaty palms still clutching her

wrinkled money. She would never get her change.

I slumped over the register as it buzzed back to life and pressed my forehead against the monitor.

"Why am I *here*?" The loaded question sunk unanswered into the stuffy air of that sorry department store, like returned merchandise placed back on the shelves for someone else's consideration.

Why do these people choose my line?

I watched one morning as he walked through the aisles like a detective on a lead. His eyes glimmered with a sense of purpose that was magnified by his thick-framed glasses. A tall, black, middle-aged man, he leaned his shoulders into a determined pace, pausing only to sip soda from a Burger King cup. He looked like a husband with a grocery list, a customer who was in the market for a big ticket item, and he was going to get it at the most reasonable price. He was not here to browse.

As he passed the checkouts, he raised his soda-free hand to offer a friendly wave.

"Good morning!" His voice rang like a bell and he had a brilliant smile to match it. *How refreshing*, I thought. *A pleasant Kmart customer.*

The four of us who worked the morning shift replied in unison.

"Hello!"

The serious resolve of a thrifty customer stole away his smile and he returned to making driven strides through every aisle, walking and searching but never stopping. Not to run his hands over the stainless steel of a toaster. Not to compare the dimensions of two television sets. Only to take a sip of soda, and only that.

Five minutes later, he was passing the checkouts after completing another full lap around the store. His free hand was in the air again. And there was that smile.

"Good morning!" He was surprised to see us, as if he had not just waved to us moments ago, as if he had forgotten where he was all together.

"Hello!" called the three ladies behind the registers to my left and right, apparently not stricken by the same *déjà vu* I was feeling.

Five more minutes would pass, and he was back again with his voice ringing out another "Good morning!" Watching the amnesiac spin circles through the store was dizzying. He lost himself in the aisles but awoke each time anew as he turned the corner towards the

checkouts.

"Wendy, do you know that man?"

"Oh, Mark? Sure I do. We all do," she nodded to Anu and Cass.

"Does he...come here often?" All three of them burst into laughter and I smiled sheepishly. Wendy, Anu, and Cass were older women who were always scheduled on day work. As the only student cashier willing to take up shifts that started at 8:00 am and ended at 5:00 pm, I had the unique pleasure of joining their company.

"Rose, he is here every single day," Wendy managed between bouts of laughter.

"E'ry day, same shirt, same pant, same cup, same sneaker," Anu chimed in, shaking her head, her fat lower lip pushing forward to twist her tan face into a hard scowl. She hated her job.

"Okay, well what is *wrong* with him?" To me, it was a logical question. Here was a man who, on a daily basis, walked the perimeter of a Big Kmart for hours and still could not remember what faces he had and had not seen. Here was a man who, maybe months or even years ago, left his house with the intention of purchasing an item but forgot along the way. Somewhere, his memory was crumpled into a grocery list scribbled on a napkin and discarded in a gutter. He walked the aisles trying to remember what it was that he wanted, but to no avail. *I know I am here for some reason, but what is it?*

I was met with silence from my coworkers. All three of them shared Anu's scowl.

"Well, Rose... Whatever is wrong with him is wrong with us, too," Cass, the oldest of the three, said with a defeated smirk. "He comes back every day and so do we."

Kmart is this hamster wheel that, once you climb on, never stops spinning. It stands attached to the corpse of a mall that saw its heyday in the 70s and sits on a lot in the center of town whose residents are still hoping for heydays. Most of its employees are people who are not going anywhere and never were. Wendy and Anu scanned toiletries, offered rewards cards, and handled money day in and day out, but at least these women were mothers working to support their families. Cass lived alone. She had fallen into the absurd simplicity of it all, checking and bagging, checking and bagging, five days a week for over thirty years. The white-haired woman returned to the same monotony

every day. Her tired, crooked spine hunched over the register, bent on some purpose, on some driving force long ago forgotten.

I felt myself slipping deeper and deeper into the routine by my second month on the job. Once an outsider looking in on the hamster cage, I began to feel the wheel rolling endlessly beneath my feet. But there was a certain ease in the wheel's pace, a constant comfort in its consistency. Customers would pile their purchases onto the counter and, one at a time, I would slide their items across the barcode scanner, a steady pulse of beeps recognizing each fluid motion. To the average customer, I was small, nobody. They did not see me. Instead, they passed me by, talking on their cell phones or wrestling with their children while I recited my lines:

"Do you have a rewards card?"

"No."

"Would you like one?"

"No."

"Have a nice day."

I was invisible to everybody. Everybody *except* those who were invisible, too.

I never imagined ex-CIA agents shopping at Kmart unless they were on some undercover gig, but there he was, a middle-aged white man of average height with a beer belly and a moustache straight out of 1975. He was wearing a t-shirt that featured a bald eagle surrounded by the words "FREEDOM AIN'T FREE."

He swiped his credit card and entered his pin number, but only after checking over both shoulders for spies.

"Does it say 'shoot on contact?'" The ancient register hummed as it processed his information.

"Er, excuse me, sir?" I smiled nervously, hoping that I had missed the punch line of some strange joke.

"Your register," he leaned across the counter to point to the monitor, infringing upon the cubicle of sanity that separated me from disgruntled customers. He tapped the screen, repeating himself, as if the problem here was actually my inability to understand English. "Is it telling you to shoot me?"

During that first month at Kmart, I had taught myself to persevere from one odd customer to the next by rarely making eye contact, smiling politely, and laughing coyly when appropriate, but this

man was not joking. I stared blankly at him, then the monitor, then back to him, waiting for a grin to peel through his crusty facial hair, for a "just kidding!" to bellow from his thick gut. But his grave expression never wavered.

"No, uh, the register is not telling me to shoot you." I finally broke the awkward silence and he stepped away, heaving a genuine sigh of relief.

"I'm surprised, really." *Really?* I handed him his bags in silence, ready to end this encounter. "Considering all the time I spent as a CIA agent overseas during Desert Storm... You would not *believe* the things I know."

He looked me straight in the eye and I recognized that faint glimmer.

He did not know why he was here, either.

The mother could not stop apologizing.

"Oh God, oh my God, I am sorry. This is so embarrassing... I am so sorry, I..."

Her little girl sat quietly in the cart, her head hung.

"It's okay, please, don't worry about it." I tried to reassure her that worse things had happened in my line.

"You uh, you might want to call for a mop..." She murmured and began to hand me her purchases, all of which were dripping wet. The little girl had an accident just as her mother wheeled her cart into my lane. *\$7.25 an hour, \$7.25 to feel urine running through my fingers. Why, why am I here?*

I was not expecting an answer, but I got one.

My hands washed once, twice, three times, I returned to my register, convinced that my day could only get better from here.

"Your job isn't easy." I turned around from dousing my hands in sanitizer to find a short man beaming at me, his ruddy face round and dimpled. A baseball cap on his head identified him as a Vietnam Vet. He had witnessed the horror of the pee incident.

"Well...thanks," I smiled genuinely for the first time that shift and started ringing him up. "I appreciate that. Do you have a rewards card?"

"No, no Rosie, I don't." He read my name off my badge.

"People forget sometimes about the little people, you know, the people they meet on a daily basis. We can learn a lot from the little people."

He was right. I had spent two months invisible, moving customers in and out of my life as quickly as possible. People laid pieces of their realities on my counter and I brushed them aside instead of trying to learn from them.

I stepped off the wheel and forgot my shtick for a moment.

"You're leaving soon, aren't you, Rose?" Cass leaned against the counter in the register next to mine. It was August and I was counting down the days until I would be free from eight hour shifts at Kmart.

"Yeah Cass, my last shift is this Friday." I could not smile about leaving Kmart in front of the one person I knew would be stuck on the wheel for years to come.

"You're heading back to college, right? You better study hard..." For a moment, she was my grandmother, wagging a cautionary finger at me. The world of intro-level retail jobs was enough to make me want to study hard.

"I will Cass," I laughed. I could not possibly see where this conversation was heading.

"Do me a favor, Rose, and don't come back here."

"What do you mean, Cass? They offered me a job for the holiday season and I thought I might..." She cut me off before I could finish.

"You're going places, Rose. I knew it from the day you got here. Whatever you want to do with your life, do it. I spent all my life behind a register and now look at me, I'm an old lady working to live on minimum wage."

I wanted to tell her that she could quit, she could walk out those doors today and say goodbye to the registers, to the managers, to the customers, to the lousy pay for the rest of her life, but I knew that she couldn't. She needs this job. She comes back every day, her eyes glimmering with a sense of some unknown purpose, like a detective on a lead. *I am here for a reason, but what is it?*

The wheel spun and spun and spun.

"We're gonna miss you here, Rose. But don't come back."

I spent that final Friday the same way I spent most of my days at Kmart – laughing with the women of the morning shift, ringing up eccentric customers, and watching Mark wind his way through the aisles

until my head spun. Each time he passed the checkouts, he left the labyrinth of his twisting daydreams to give us a smile and the usual "Good morning!" He was always surprised to find us there and we always waved back.

Mark kept walking with steady resolve right up until I clocked out at five o'clock that evening. Some realization must have hit him – *I don't know why I'm here*. He waved once more, this time bidding me good evening as we both moved through the exit. His smile was gone and his voice cracked, but I found some relief in the thought of him waking up the next morning with no recollection of what had happened the day before, pulling on the same shirt and the same pants, stopping at the same Burger King, and spinning the same circles through Kmart, in search of that one thing he needed...

One Moment in the Garden

Life tells us, "See, it will only
be a vacation, our parting"
and we want to believe—
but we have seen what becomes
of abandoned onion and carrot patches.
Some never sprout again, their dry shells
weary even of disintegration, so they sulk
and haunt our eyes with fortunes
about stagnancy. The miscarried baby
carrots take new shapes like something
that has been spit out.
Can you count them? Blended
as they are with earth, almost
invisible. Things never birthed at all.

Our heroes do not leave
scars between each untouchable star
or scarlet when the sun lowers (in
their memory). They left too busily
to settle any such expansive (or expensive) will;
eating poached eggs in high chestnut kitchen stools,
they joked about the morning's petals
lined with clear milk and strung
with sticky wires—by spindle-folk
that nightly disassemble those linking
chains of shape. Little things
need no shape to hold a legacy.
The transformation of light and silk
to nothing in the green. Nature chooses
whether to hide or reveal illusion:
in our ignorance, all webs are perfect.
Frost bitten vegetables never dreamed
perfection for themselves, and they
only linger long enough for a poem
to mark the first snowfall.

Water, Focused and Tumbling

That view of her is infinite, bronze legs splitting the rain,
hair the color of ash-clouds tipping unstable atmosphere.
Our gray shirts were opaque and lightning
glowed like jagged streams from a prism.

When we left at noon, the earth's breath was 67 and sunny; the sky was
tame as a table
set for tea and hot-cakes. We wore matching outfits, Bandalino pumps.
At four, we left the comic store downtown and felt the first drops that
killed dry sleep. I remember the clamminess of the sidewalk building up
beneath us.

Marti covered the half-eaten sandwich in her left hand and squealed
and we fled to the post office awning, the aroma of young grass painted
inside our nostrils.

"Eventually we have to cross," I said; she lit up a Captain Black.
Traffic sloshed on, losing us in its thick, drumbeat scurry. "My socks,"
Marti whined, "are wet. Fuck."

When we reached Locust and 5th, her grape lipstick was a bruised badge.

Main Street twinkled behind us like pennies
scattered in the sun, a blur of potential dinner parties and afternoons
of tabby-faced old women window shopping.
Young people never lingered long; we had our own
"alive spots," the open top levels of parking garages, stick and stone
paths
off the main cement trail in the park, storage sheds behind factories.
Marti and I would shop for used books, the kind of paperbacks
that stink of deep oak chests in Maine. We read them to each other
hidden in the bulrushes near the creek behind St. Agatha's.

She cuddled my elbow in her pliable, cotton-covered belly, dripping on
me
from her chin and neck.
We were so blushed and fawnlike in our navy blue pleated skirts,
dreamy faces like dolls, so tender

that the waterfall almost felled us.

I'm sure each taxi and minivan that picked us out in the fluid fog of rain took us for stranded schoolgirls, or streetwalkers.

Was I anxious? I told Marti

and she tilted up her thin, black brows.

"We look too innocent, and we're drenched," she replied, placing long fingers

on my shoulder, "rapists would feel bad."

The Laundromat was another half a block west; I stopped holding my breath

and wondering if the inside of my purse was damp, making mold on the contents. Instead I watched her beside me, heels pattering in the stilettos,

thinking that her pace would calm my heart's pulse, the awkwardness of vulnerability, a translucent nostalgia

this element pries from us.

We crossed to the side with the low-roofed slate building, its gaudy red letters

like a Midwestern carnival or an adult store, or maybe

a corner tattoo parlor complete with barred windows.

Marti challenged me with her dusty eyes and we ran to it, racing each other for incentive,

the hair around our ears jumping in springy, grapelike clusters.

We seemed to totter, like it was water we trod

so clumsily that it was almost, I think, endearing.

"Quick—in," I laughed. I was self-conscious then that she saw my damp cheekbones

protruding. They bullied the contours of my face, I thought.

They are confident, too cruel.

And she never noticed. Her visage was plump and morning-moist, comfortable

as aged Pinot Grigio, as sex.

Did she remember the evening before, the high-pitched talk of going to India in 2010? "For a spiritual journey?" she had asked, "or wildlife tour?"

She would not mention it again, I thought, even though her bones are wetter, whiter now.

It would take hours to dry, and I had to be home at six.

We only invite supper guests who like strong spices; Marti's palette is American.

At home, I'd sit on a windowsill in my parents' bedroom before dinner in a robe the shade of pink I've always thought was too safe, contemplating how lightly the rain spills and how that other curvier water-girl would not care that she cannot revoke words whispered.

Requiem for a Marriage

Soprano: I can't believe I'm doing this. Maybe I am a little crazy.

Brent says that's what he

Alto: Looking miserable, as always. We're in the big city, Brent's favorite place to be, and he

Tenore: That chandelier must have cost a fortune. Christ, there must be more crystal on that

Basso: Jessica has never looked lovelier than she does right now, the dim crystal-reflected light

likes about me. That I'm not the norm. I think he's usually referring to how I am in bed, though, still looks like he's got a log shoved up his ass. Going to the concert was his idea, for God's thing than there is in a fucking Swarovski store. If it fell on us right now, we'd be crushed to playing on her face. God, what I wouldn't give to call her mine forever. To be hers forever, too.

but hell, I'll take that. I know he loves me for who I am, with or without the sex. I'm so much sake. He could at least crack a smile, a grin, something. But what am I saying? He never smiles death, left bleeding by a million little shining shards. I can see it in the papers: Hundreds The ring. It was so expensive. But she'll love it, I know she will. It's not Tiffany's, but

better than that bitch he calls his wife. I didn't expect her to be blond, though. He never anymore. He just looks around him like he's confused, like he doesn't know where he is. No Crushed by Chandelier at Mozart Concert. Owners of Opera House Lament Loss of Chandelier. Jessica's not a very materialistic girl. She'll appreciate how hard I worked to save up for it. I

mentioned that. Not that it's real. The woman's 45, same age as he is.
You know she must be
wonder he makes next to nothing, if he's always looking like *that*.
People aren't going to tip a
Maybe if it started falling I could rush out of the way and let it hit
Lindsey. She *loves* shiny
can just see her face when I ask her. I wonder if she'll cry. She's so
sensitive; that's what I love

dyeing it. Trying to look young and sexy for a man who wouldn't touch
her if you paid him.
waiter that looks like he's lost in the restaurant that he's been working at
for almost fourteen
expensive shit. Well, there's a whole bunch of it right there. What a
way to go. 'Here you go,
about her. Women these days can be so unbelievably crass. Not my
Jessica. She's so delicate.

He's got me now, anyway. Brent's right, she really doesn't know. She
wouldn't look that smug
years. He probably forgets all the orders and just frowns people out of
saying anything to the
honey. In honor of our crumbling relationship I got you some crystal.'
CRASH. Ha ha and
Almost fragile, but not quite breakable. Both sensitive and strong. And
beautiful. Her long

if she knew that her husband's *real* lover was here. I'm the one he tells
everything to. I'm the
manager. It's really a wonder that he hasn't been fired yet, with the
economy gone to hell and
then I'd waltz right out of here to Jessica's place and fuck her pretty
little brains out. Ahhh, that
brown hair is so gorgeous when it's down. I'm glad she listened to me
when I told her not to put

one who comforts him after she's spent three hours screaming at him
for not working hard

most of the restaurants in Swedesboro working off of four servers or less, regardless of the size slut is something else. Makes me feel like I'm twenty again. I got so lucky with her. All of the it up. 'You look so perfect with your hair down, Jessica,' I said. 'Like an angel. Like a rose.

enough. He works harder than she'll ever know. Especially with me on Tuesday and Thursday of the place. And Mama Lucia's can't possibly sit more than thirty people. They must pity him other women at the restaurant know my reputation. I can't fuck any of them anymore, now that Any woman would be jealous of you, and any man would want you.' 'Yeah?' she said. 'Well,

nights. God he's amazing. Confident, experienced. Nothing like Steve, who practically shakes because he's worked there for so long. What a lazy ass, working at a restaurant for his entire life they know I was doing Barbara (Jesus she had such nice tits) on Mondays and Carolyn on then I guess I'll wear it down. I want to look my best. For the concert, of course.' That's my

the bed with his trembling every time he tries to have sex with me. I don't even know what the like a high school kid who needs some extra change for pot and to take girls to the movies. Wednesdays. Carolyn's tits were okay. But Jessica got hired and showed up at the restaurant Jessica. Always trying to look her best when we go out together. Trying to please me, I guess.

hell I'm still doing with Steve. He means nothing to me. I guess maybe I kinda just like the While his *wife* works her ass off every day at a ruthless corporation, trying to make ends meet. I acting like she was the queen of the world and earned the hatred of

every other woman in that
Well, she certainly does that. She looks particularly radiant this evening.
The voices of the choir

intrigue of it. That's pretty fucked up. No, that can't be it... Yes, yes, I
think it actually is. No
should be teaching college. I have my doctorate for fuck's sake! What
did I do all of that work
place before she so much as said 'hello,' so they won't tell her shit about
me. Leave it to a
seem to swirl around her. They must be singing just for her. Even
though we're in the balcony,

point in denying it. It's kind of fun sneaking around, trying not to get
caught. And it's not like
for? Just to let it all go to waste? That dick of a boss won't even call
me *Doctor* Jensen. Instead
bunch of jealous women to make it easier for a man to screw each one
of them. I do have to
the members of the choir must see the light she gives off. She is
fascinated by them, she's been

Steve hasn't set himself up for it. He's such a little girl! So ridiculously
trusting, fawning all
he calls me Lindsey, or Mrs. Jensen when he's trying to be more formal
during those unbearable
keep an eye on Carolyn, though. I'm not sure if she's still pissed at me
enough to actually
looking down at the choir ever since we got here. I wonder what
they're singing. I don't know

over me like I'm a goddess. I mean, I like the attention, but his stupid
clichés get so annoying
meetings. I really don't know how I put up with it. Working for that
chauvinist son of a bitch
overcome her hatred of Jessica and say something to her. She might do
that to spite me. She has
any Latin. Jessica might know. It was her idea to come, she says she
positively adores Mozart.

after a while! Who am I supposed to pick as a lover when Brent
whispers in my ear about how
just to bring home money to a thankless man. It was worth it when
Jonathan still lived with us.
to know that I go to Jessica's apartment twice a week. She sees me
follow her out of the parking
She's so full of surprises. She's never mentioned her love of Mozart
before. I'll have to

good my body feels, about how tight I am, while Steve just pants,
'You're my angel, baby.
At least I knew that *he* was appreciative, that *he* cared how hard I
worked. What a wonderful
lot and make a right even though my house is to the left. Oh well, I'll
just have to enjoy it while
remember that. When I take her back to my house after the show
tonight, all set up with a bottle

You're my angel, baby,' over and over again until I want to scream?
Not from pleasure, either.
son. The best a mother could ask for. Nothing like his father. I don't
know how he turned out
it lasts. And Jessica thinks I'm going to leave Lindsey for her. Poor
dumb bitch. She thinks I'm
of wine and new satin sheets and rose petals on the bed, I'll tell her that
we can go to as many

Maybe I should break it to him tonight. I don't know how much more
I can take. Or maybe...
so well. It's a miracle. So ambitious! So successful! Lord knows he
wasn't getting those
in love with her. Well, I am in love with that ass, but I'm divorcing
Lindsey because I can't
Mozart concerts as she could possibly want throughout our life
together. 'Just spend the rest of

maybe I'll just send him the message right now. He has to know that I
haven't wanted him lately,

attributes from any *male* role models in the house. We're lucky he was our only one. It's not stand her anymore, not because I want to spend the rest of my life with Jessica. I mean, come your life with me, Jessica, and let me spend the rest of my life with you, and I promise I'll make

that I've been coming up with increasingly idiotic excuses not to see him on Tuesdays and that I would have objected to more children, I just would have objected to more children with on. Shackle myself to another woman right when I got rid of the one who's been murdering me you happy.' Oh, I hope she says yes. But of course she will. We've been together for two years;

and Thursdays. And I want Brent to know I'm here. I wasn't kidding when I said that I'd come Brent. The chances of another one turning out like Jonathan are one in a million. Not that Brent slowly ever since I said 'I do' back in 1988? Hell no. Mmmm, though I might be willing to it's time to take the next step. I'm ready for it, I know what I want. And I know that she loves

tonight and tell his wife to her face about us. There's an empty seat next to him. I'm going. I ever really *tried* to get another one after Jonathan. He's hardly touched me in the last twenty shackle myself to that gorgeous soprano soloist up on stage, at least temporarily. Lord, what a me. We're going to be so happy together, for the rest of forever. But wait, where is she going?

should feel bad for Steve. But I don't. I don't at all. As a matter of fact, I'm really enjoying this. years. Well, that's *his* loss, not mine. I certainly don't need a man to be happy, and he was rack! What I wouldn't give to be taking *that* girl home tonight, instead

of the wrinkly bitch

Hmmm. She must have to visit the ladies' room. Shame for her to have to miss any of this.

God I'm screwed up. "Excuse me. Excuse me." Lucky there's an empty seat here. Brent always shit in bed anyway. Always trying to get first place in the Fuck Lindsey Marathon. The sitting next to me. I'd get my hands on that pair and – Wh-What the fuck?! Oh shit, shit, shit, Wait, is that her in the aisle down there? Yes, but what... what is she doing? Why is she sitting

doesn't look happy. I thought he would be pleased to see me, pleased to see the risk I am taking, Fuck Lindsey 50-Yard Dash, more like. God, what I've endured living with him. He doesn't shit, shit, shit! Shit, this bitch is crazy I thought she was kidding what the hell is she thinking? next to that older gentleman, and staring at him? She must know him. A relative? I thought I

Now he knows I'm serious. He's probably just surprised. I'll take his hand, show him that I'm even care that I have to go back to work tomorrow, on a Saturday, for TEN HOURS, just so that Fuck, okay, I just have to stay calm. Keep it together, old boy. Oh God, come on Jessica, you're knew all of her relatives. This is very strange. I hope she is all right. Wait, is she taking his

here for him. You don't have to be scared of that bitch sitting next to you, baby. Jessica's here we can afford the heating bill this month. No, he just sits there, not a care in the world. There's really going to hold my fucking hand right now?! Lindsey'll drive a stake through my heart if hand? What's going on here? Why is she staring at him like that?! Who is this guy? Who the

now. I'm going to make everything all right. Damn it Brent, look at me! Don't glance at your probably not anything even going through his mind. He doesn't have to worry about presenting she sees this. She might not even wait until we get home, either. She'll fucking crucify me right hell is this guy?! Stay calm, Steve. Maybe he's just an...old friend or something? Oh who am I

wife, look at ME! I'M the one who loves you, I'M-.....Well, it's about goddamn time. in front of the board of directors. Nope. He just gets to daydream about serving the soup of the here and now. I've got to do something about this. "Jessica." Oh shit why does my voice sound kidding? I've never seen that look in her eyes before. The man is talking to her. God I wish I

Mmm, his breath smells like a candy cane. I'll kiss him. How will that be for an answer, baby? day to people who won't even tip him. Completely oblivious. That's what he is, completely so loud? Keep it down, you dumb shit! "Jessica, baby. What are you doing here?" Oh god..... knew what he was saying! Why are you leaning so close to her, you old bastard? No. No no no

"I'm here for you, baby. Let's show that bitch what real love is..... Shhh, just go with it." Yes. oblivious. Oblivious to the world around him. Oblivious to his wife who suffers in solitude."No."Shit. no no no no. She did not just kiss him. My Jessica did not just kiss that man. She's... grabbing

Now she'll see now she'll see. Oh quit clearing your throat you old fart behind us can't you see

Just the other day I tried to talk to him about it. I said, 'Brent, could we please talk tomorrow
Shit, she's pretty strong. You'd think after I've been spending so much time in her bed I'd know
his head what the hell what the fuck? This isn't happening. Isn't happening right now no it's not.

we're BUSY? Why.....

.....

night? I think there are some things we need to discuss.' And instead of, 'Sure, honey, you're
how strong she is. "Stop! Stop Jessica! What the fuck are you thinking? Lindsey's right next
I've got the ring in my pocket. She doesn't love me. So much money. Cheating. Cheating

..... WHAT?! "I

thought you would like it if I
my wife and I'd be happy to talk to you,' I get, "Tomorrow is Tuesday night, right? Yes, it is.
to me and I don't want her to know about us! I don't know how-" she hasn't noticed yet. Thank
cheating cheating. Unfaithful. Dishonest. I trusted her. Oh god, I'm crying. I lived for you,

came! I want your wife to know about us and so do you. I love you, Brent. I love you! You're
Tuesday is bowling night. You know this. It's been Tuesday and Thursday nights for five
god she's blind as a bat and just fucking oblivious besides. Oh god, she said it. The l-word.
Jessica. I'll... I'll... I'll... I'll show that bastard! I'll show that son of a bitch! I'll show him

going to leave her and live with me-" Oh shit. Steve. I forgot about Steve. "It's Steve." Is he
months now.' That's the most he's said- Who the hell is yelling? Some guy up in the balcony?
Shut up, Lindsey, shut up! Crazy bitch- Who the hell is yelling? Some

nut job up in the balcony.

whose girl he's messing with! "You! YOU! You get your hands off her you son of a bitch! I'm

really going to come down here? Shit. "Brent, Brent, I didn't think he'd have the balls, Brent.

Why is he looking at us and screaming and- and who the hell is that girl talking to Brent?

He's looking at me. Jessica's holding on to me and screaming in my ear and oh shit, Lindsey's coming for you!" Son of a bitch son of a bitch son of a bitch son of a bitch son of a bitch son of

He's coming down what are we going to do? Fuck... You can take him, Brent. He's like a two-

Dressed like an absolute prostitute. Could that skirt be any shorter?

Why is she holding on to

seen us. This guy is coming for me. The choir's still singing. Yes, I can take him. Steve, that's

a bitch son of a bitch son of a bitch unfaithful she was unfaithful I'm going to show her who the

year-old girl. Here he comes!!" Oh shit! Oh god, I heard that crack.

Well that's what he gets

him like that? Oh my god he's cheat- Oh my god! "Brent! What the fuck is going on! Why did

his name, Steve. Here he comes- Right in the nose, motherfucker. You want to mess with me?!

real man is I'm a man I'm a man OH GOD! OH GOD MY NOSE!

Broken oh shit! Oh god oh

for coming down here, trying to act like a hero. Take him away, boys.

Thank God there's

you hit that man! Why was he screaming at you? WHO THE HELL IS THAT GIRL? Explain

Huh? "Huh?!" Messing with the big man. "Take him, security, take him." I'm fucking your

god. That son of a bitch! No! No! "No!" No I don't want to go

"LET GO" of me! Damn it

security in this place. Oh my god, Brent's talking to his wife- Jesus, Steve, stop fucking yourself!"..... "Yes?".....
"YES?".....
girlfriend- "Lindsey."..... "Lindsey?"..... "I want a divorce. This is Jessica. She works with damn it. Jessica Jessica Jessica Jessica "Jessica Jessica Jessica JESSICA JESSICA JESSICA!"

screaming. Thank God they've taken him outside. Lindsey's looking at me, he must have told.....He's fucking her.
That bastard. That bastard.
me at the restaurant. I want a divorce, Lindsey." Now it's done. Now she knows. I'm free.

her. "Do you want to move in with me tonight, Brent? Be free of that bitch.....
How does that little slut have the nerve to face me right now?
Unbelievable- Did she just call me
I'M FREE! No more nagging no more crying no more wrinkles no more no "NO! I don't want

.....Oh, fuck.
a bitch?
.....That bastard.
to move in with you, you crazy bitch!!! I'm free of both of you! Of ALL of you!!!!" I'm gone.

Gertrude's Book

Judy finished speaking and tucked the paper with the words she wrote the night before into one of her shallow pockets. She stepped down from the podium. Her hands glided over her trunk and legs to even out any wrinkles in her simple black dress. She tried very hard to ignore the rows of friends and vague acquaintances who, she knew, kept their eyes fixed on her the entire time. Flicking a strand of graying reddish-brown hair from her face, she fell onto the uncomfortable wooden bench with a sigh, rejoining her brother in the front row. Her husband, seated behind her, touched her shoulder tenderly. She clasped his hand there, massaging the hairy leathery back of it with her painted finger tips.

Now her brother rose from beside her. He performed a similar ritual, straightening his black pants and tie. He stretched his neck out as he worked on the knot around his throat. It made him look like a turtle with his already long neck and wrinkling bald head. He began his unsteady march to the podium, crushing in his palm a piece of paper of his own. Unlike Judy, who took great pride in how pristine she kept her belongings, her brother seemed indifferent. He was a few years younger than she, but even as children, this was the case. Somehow, though, their mother managed to criticize them both. That was her way.

About a year ago, Judy had visited her mother in the home. The dull mucus colored walls of peeling paper, decorated with a pattern of fading flowers, still sent shudders down into her gut. The door read "106 Ms. Gertrude Segal," cut out in cheaply printed white paper.

With a flick of her wrist, the door knob popped and Judy pushed her way into the room. The walls pulsed with white light from the glowing television nestled opposite the bed. The smell of rubber and moldy food entered Judy's nose and clung stubbornly to the lining of her nasal cavity. Ted and the aide Emily already stood beside the bed.

"Eat, Ms. Gertrude. You need to eat." Judy recognized Emily's distinctive Burmese accent. Her plea went unacknowledged. Judy took her position between her brother and the aide. Ted's wrinkled brow and wide eyes betrayed his concern for his mother's thinning form.

"Hi, Mom," Judy said, forcing a slight smile. Gertrude's eyes, embedded like shining brown jewels in a coarse and cracked cliff face,

looked up into those of her daughter. Her chapped grey lips did not even quiver. She spoke, intoned like a battle worn woman, convinced she was on the side of justice. To Judy, it sounded like her mother had to gasp in order to say anything. "They won't let me watch my show..." Judy regarded the muted but still bright black box with a twitch of her head.

The remote lay on the night stand beside the bed. The tension in the room was palpable. There had been a fight.

"Eat a little soup, Ms. Gertrude," Emily said, scooping up some undoubtedly cold red broth from a Styrofoam bowl.

"Later," the bedridden woman said, sighing. Emily hovered the spoon by Gertrude's mouth.

The aide's eyes narrowed. In other circumstances, Judy might have snickered at the contorted expression on Emily's face. This time, however, she too felt the frustration. Gertrude finally parted her lips slightly. Emily slipped the spoon past her teeth. It settled on the old woman's tongue like a boat docking in port. Judy heard the slurping of soup draining from its reservoir. Even that sounded unwilling. "There, Ms. Gertrude, that not so bad. Yes?"

Gertrude kept her eyes focused on Emily's face as she committed her next act of defiance. Again, her lips parted, and the soup dribbled out, spilling down her chin and onto her bed sheets in a Rorschach-like stain of rebellion. The aide's tiny frame shook as she made a sound somewhere between grinding gears and a toddler who just dropped her ice-cream cone. Opening her eyes, she looked from the patient in the bed to the patient's two grown children. "Excuse me," she mumbled before shuffling out of the room. The door slid closed.

With a hollow click, the walls faded to their original misty blue color. "Now Mom," Ted said, drawing his finger back from the power button. "Why won't you eat?"

Gertrude took a while to answer. She reclined, sinking into the pillows on her bed. She wiggled uncomfortably. "Because food is unnecessary. But I will...later."

"But you have to eat now, Mom." Ted crossed his arms as he spoke. For a moment, Judy was proud of her brother. He stood there as if nothing Gertrude could say could sway him from his stance. He was mighty. At least for the moment...

Gertrude shook her head. "I have to eat when I want to eat,"

she said. She coughed—her entire body trembled. “Let me watch my show, Ted. I am your mother.” Judy could see Ted’s quaking lower lip, his rigid shoulders, his sigh of deference. He once again tapped the power button. The visage of Julia Child popped back onto the screen. She looked out of the box, at the three people in the room with her crooked smile. As she sprinkled some paprika on her unseen dish, her voice sounded like it scraped against the walls. Gertrude was beaming.

An uneasy silence oozed over the crowd as Ted had to pause in the midst of his eulogy. He supported himself with the podium, recovering his composure until he could continue addressing the crowd of polite listeners.

Judy slipped her hand into her leather pocket book that rested like a kitten on her lap. There it was: the smooth soft cover of black leather and the uneven withered pages. She lifted the small book a few inches from her bag and admired it. It was still there. It did not go anywhere—not in all this time.

“What the hell?” she screamed. *Her* book was there on the kitchen table for the entire world to see. Its small frail silver lock broken, it hung open. Judy felt naked. She fell upon the book, quickly closing it up again, fumbling with the lock that felt entirely bent out of shape. She could not click it together as she had so many times in the past. She just wanted to hear that reassuring sound of safety—of privacy. “Ted!” she yelled next, trying to will her voice to stretch up the stairs and spill into her brother’s room. From the kitchen, she could detect a soft rumbling of commotion upstairs. The noise migrated to the stairwell nearby. Thud. Thud. Thud. Ted barreled down the stairs to obey his summons. Bruno, the family pug, hurried along at his feet, yelping and jumping.

“You jerk! You read my diary!” She thrust a finger into Ted’s chest—he looked like it had been a knife. “And you broke it! What the hell, Ted?”

“I didn’t!” he insisted, eyeing the book as if it had betrayed him.

“Then who did?”

“How should I know?” Bewildered, he ran his fingers through his full head of hair.

Judy grabbed him by his shirt collar. Ted coughed, as if fearing she would strangle him.

"Mom!" Judy called to somewhere in the house. No response. "Mom!"

"What?"

"Ted looked through my diary!"

"Huh?" A moment of heavy silence. "I'll be right there." An audible sigh followed. She appeared in the threshold of the kitchen. Her narrow face cocked to one side and her eyes squinting at her children as if she had been asleep. "Judy, what do you want?" she asked.

"Ted looked through my diary....the ass!"

"I didn't touch your diary," Ted shouted, appearing to be taken aback by sudden indignation as the situation finally solidified in his mind. He knocked Judy's hand away from his collar with a loud thwap. Judy recoiled. "You little dickhead. What do you think you're doing?"

"I didn't look at it!"

Gertrude sighed again. The air sounded like it barely slipped through her clenched teeth—like a snake's hiss. The sound managed to summon Judy's attention. Ted looked too, maybe hoping for a reprieve. Bruno jumped around. Like Judy, he seemed ready to bite someone.

"Judy, Ted didn't read your diary," she said matter-of-factly. She straightened up, lowering her eyelids as if bored with the entire situation. "I did."

"Why?" Judy found herself seized with a sickening desire to burn the pages of that tiny book that no longer had the power to keep people out. She felt violated, unclean, dirty. She wanted to bury it in the lawn outside, beneath the shimmering grass. There it could rot. All her secrets would decompose. "What were you thinking?"

Gertrude stretched out her neck in that turtle like way that Judy sometimes suspected was genetic. "Well, how else was I going to find out what's going on in your life?" She turned to walk away, as if to say *'That is sufficient. Case closed. Good bye.'*

"Mom!" Gertrude stopped. "That's my diary. It's locked for a reason."

"Oh? I did have trouble getting it open. I used the edge of a spoon to smash it."

"Oh my God! This is unbelievable. How much did you read?" Judy wanted to run to the bathroom to hide among the soft colors and flowery smells.

"Not that much..." (An obvious lie.) "But what do you think

you're doing breaking up with Herby? He's a nice Jewish boy."

"That's none of your business!" Judy scooped up the book and tucked it under her arm. "Oh my god, if you want a diary, get one of your own!"

"You see?" Gertrude said, raising her voice an octave. "You're changing the subject! If you won't talk to me, I just have to find things out in other ways!"

"You're a bitch!"

"Watch your mouth. I am your mother!"

"God!" Judy ran from the kitchen. Her skin crawled.

That night, after everyone had gone to sleep, Judy did burn her tiny colorful book with the busted lock. She went to the backyard with a bottle of her mom's Jameson and a matchbook. Once the diary was afloat in a puddle of the bitter smelling liquid, she ripped out a match. The whiskey burned first, but the book absorbed the fire soon afterwards. Judy returned to the house smelling like alcohol and smoke. Even after showering, she still went to bed with the stench heavy in her nostrils.

A week and a half later, it was her mother's 47th birthday. All Judy gave her was a small book with black leather covers. On the very first page she wrote with thick red marker, "*SCREW YOU.*" The ink seeped through the next ten pages.

Judy rose from the bench. She and Ted, followed by Judy's husband, began migrating to the door at the back of the chapel. In waves, everyone else seated in the pews rolled out into the aisle and followed. In the very last row, she saw Emily, sitting there stiffly, with her hands folded over her lap.

She jumped to her feet. "My day off," she said.

Judy continued on. The hearse and the entirety of the funeral precession waited for her outside. Her husband drove.

Doctor Alderman, the home's psychologist, met with Judy once. As usual, the TV buzzed in the background with the wonderful sounds of the cooking channel. This time, Bobby Flay explained how to make some sort of rich chocolate brownie swirled with caramel and peanut butter. An uneaten piece of flounder and a bowl of Jell-O lay on the nightstand.

"Did she prepare a lot of food when she was living at home?"

Alderman asked, sliding a thin note pad from his side pocket.

"No. In fact, I don't remember her ever cooking when I was growing up. We use to go out to eat at least three times a week...or I would eat at a friend's house."

"Oh, I see," Alderman said. He looked back at the TV screen, peering at it through his dirty spectacles. "The nurses tell me they never see her eat. They have to fight with her to get her to turn off the TV. It's always on the same channel too."

"Yeah, that sounds like Mom," Judy replied. She looked over at her mother, wrapped in a cocoon of knitted sheets. Her eyes stared intently at the flashing screen. "Mom?" Judy said, trying her best to sound respectful. "Mom, I want to talk to you."

"At the commercial, Judy."

Doctor Alderman cleared his throat to announce that he was removing himself from the room. Judy looked over her shoulder at him to give the doctor a lop-sided half smile as if to say *'I guess I'll take it from here.'*

When Alderman left, some measure of warmth left with him. What remained were two people, one persistent in her relative youth and the other stubborn with the unyielding rust of old age.

Judy crossed the room to silence the TV with the push of a button. She looked back at her mother, whose wrinkles deepened with resentment. "I said we need to talk, Mom."

"I said at the commercial, Judy." Gertrude's sheets pooled around her. Judy knew her mom was trying to roll over. "It's not as important."

"I don't understand why you think your show is more important than your health!" As Judy spoke, she resisted the urge to slap her mother (in the name of Gertrude's health, of course). "You look like you're wasting away. Just eat a little more."

"Judy," Gertrude answered. "My shows are more important than my health and my food. I can't take either of them with me. Can I?"

Stunned, Judy blinked a few times to chase the sound of her mother's raspy voice from her brain so she could respond. "But you can't take your shows with you either, can you?"

In the same way that water washes over a written page, making the words fuzzy and barely legible, so too did Gertrude's eyes seem to change. She and Judy exchanged awkward gazes, but Judy could not be

sure that her mother was actually looking at her. The brittle body of the elderly woman, whose every breath she expelled in a sigh, sunk more deeply into her mattress.

"Mom?" Gertrude nodded acknowledgement. "Do you want me to let you get back to what you were doing?" Again she nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow?" Another nod.

Judy crept out of the room. In that strange moment, she had suddenly felt like an intruder in her mother's presence. As she left, she heard the click of the TV bursting back into action.

Seven o'clock in the morning, the telephone next to Judy's bed rang and continued to ring. Then it stopped. Judy hid beneath her pillow. The gentle flow of her husband's whisper still managed to creep into her head. Click. He hung up the phone. The bed dipped from his weight. He touched her shoulder.

"Judy..." He whispered.

She pulled her head from under the pillow. His voice quivered while relaying the conversation. He held her eyes with his own, like he was afraid she would drift away.

"You can go. I'll call your boss. You don't need to worry about that," he said, rubbing her back. "Do you want me to go with you? I can call mine too."

"No...no, it's ok. I can go. It's fine."

The drive over seemed like it took no time at all—less than usual. Every car, every light was directed to a singular point—a door, opened ajar, from which hummed the vague sounds of the glowing tube. Judy slipped through the crack of the door. Emily followed her with a phone to her ear.

"Mrs. Segal, I am very sorry. I just called the funeral home. They be here in forty minutes."

Judy nodded, though her eyes remained fixed on the bed. Gertrude lay there, motionless as she had for months. But it was different now. Then, her eyes were opened and focused, all intensity on the TV screen. Now they were closed and her mouth hung agape. And, most importantly, the TV continued on. Graham Kerr did not stop mixing his beet salad and rambling in his smooth British accent to pay his respects.

But Judy had to stop—even though she only had a vague idea of

what she was supposed to be doing alone in the room with her withered mother anyway. She noticed a tiny black book on the night stand, left out for her to find. Picking it up, she felt like she was seeing a long lost face, full of memories. Someone who looked tattered now. She took it. It wedged itself in her purse between her lipstick and her checkbook, like it belonged there.

Judy pressed the button on the set and the image on the TV shrunk—before light and sound fell entirely into darkness.

The funeral ended. Ted wiped his hands and handed the shovel to Judy. She dug it into the mound of dirt beside the grave and lifted a boulder's worth. She allowed it to drop on the casket. It pattered like rain. The members of the procession took up the shovel in turn.

As the pile of dirt diminished, Judy cleared her throat. To her surprise, as soon as she began to make noise, everyone paused to listen. She removed the leather book from her bag. "Um..." she hesitated when she opened it to the first page. There, in the angst-ridden scrawl of a sixteen year old girl, "*SCREW YOU*" had not vanished. She forced herself to move past the page to the next one. Ten pages later, she found the words written in the trembling hand of a tired old lady. She read verbatim from the page. "Please join my daughter and her family, at their home at 317 Oak Avenue, for some after funeral refreshments. We will be serving..." She flipped a head to another page, where a checkmark whipped across a list of ingredients, "...Beef Burgundy..." She flipped ahead again, until she saw another checkmark, "Escargot..." She flipped ahead again. Another checkmark. "Triple fudge marble brownies..." And again. "Carmalized pears and..." Flip. "Braised pork loin." Flip. "Roasted duck with raspberry glaze." Flip. "Caesar salad." Flip. "Peach melba..." Judy spent what seemed like at least fifteen minutes reading off every recipe from the book where she found a checkmark.

She flicked the pages aside. The remaining pile of unread ones thinned until she reached the end. There were no more recipes, compiled from those years in the home. Now, these were the only words remaining, written at the bottom of the last page: "Cry only as much as you need to, my friends and family. Just don't let it ruin your appetite. Bon appetit." Judy slipped the notebook back into her bag. She took a seat and watched as her mother's coffin disappeared beneath the earth.

Bomber (Inspired by Sylvia Plath's *Collosus*)

It scathes beneath the sun.
Yellow, but hot black at its center.
Invisible burns on its rough heart.
Labors over torn hills,
Battered like every other castle wall.

It stretches the road long—
A drawn shadow like a sharpened cane wand
Held aloft from the dead ground—
A grey Rothko stripe,
By balloons.
Flannel sacks of green and brown,
Leashed jellyfish.

Reminds of the oceanographer,
Carried over cerulean plains—
Less dead than these—
But just as turbulent.
In a thatched box
Attached to a hundred poor seagulls,
Whose tortured cries sound his arrival.
Progress is made through pain he said,
And so.
He drew the world.

This flying machine take more than one hundred lives.
And human too,
Soot-caked black—
A bloodied raven,
Diamond hard angles,
Charcoal eyes of fired sand,
Chemical poisoned dark.
Buttons Braille

Atticus Graven

Levers bone
Dead as those it flies above—
The pale horseman has found a Pegasus.

The rider too.
Steeped in Methyl mercury,
A shade himself.
But truly only one third dead,
One third soulless.
His pain comes later

Another

Sunshine
and diamonds
tumble past your lips,
leaving them clean
to steal away
the wondering, etched
into my chest
by every hand
that's come before:

*Words
are not
a promise.*

We were openly
invisible,
pressed
up against
the stairwell wall.
I let you smooth
the scabs
with your warm
finger tips, healing
what I have
to keep hidden
from friends
shooting questions
like arrows.

"He's busy"
tasted of truth
on my tongue,

like lemon pie
on a summer night.
Your promises
blurred the hurt
like swirls
of melted sorbet
so I couldn't taste
the salt.

Mere days
of delusion
before you became
like all
the others,
when you scorched
and tore
at the scars
from before,
reopened
when you whispered

*I'm falling
for her.*

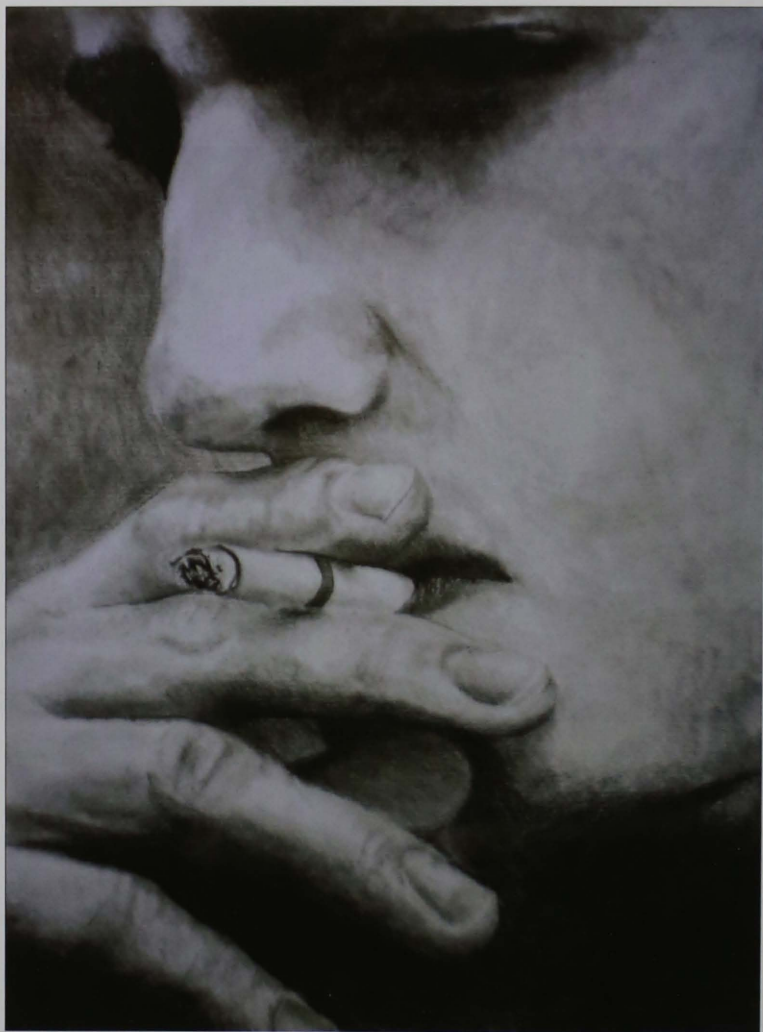
Allison Cavanaugh

Château d'If



Sarah Cogswell

Man Smoking in Charcoal



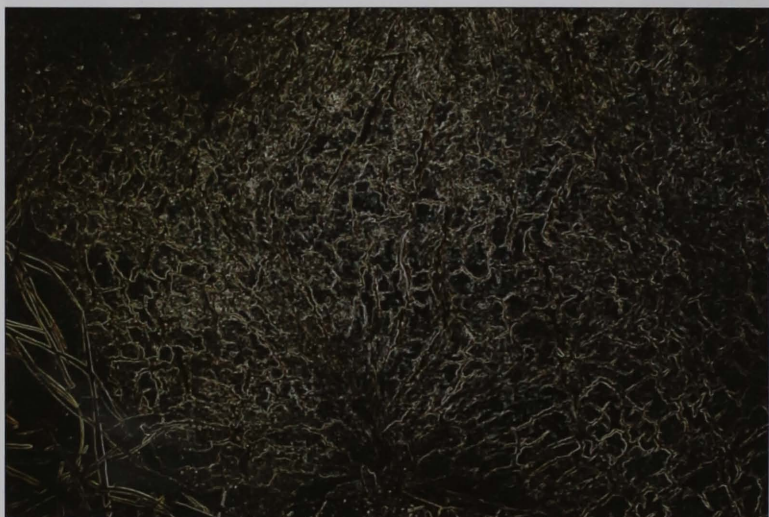
Adam DiCaprio

Inside Auschwitz

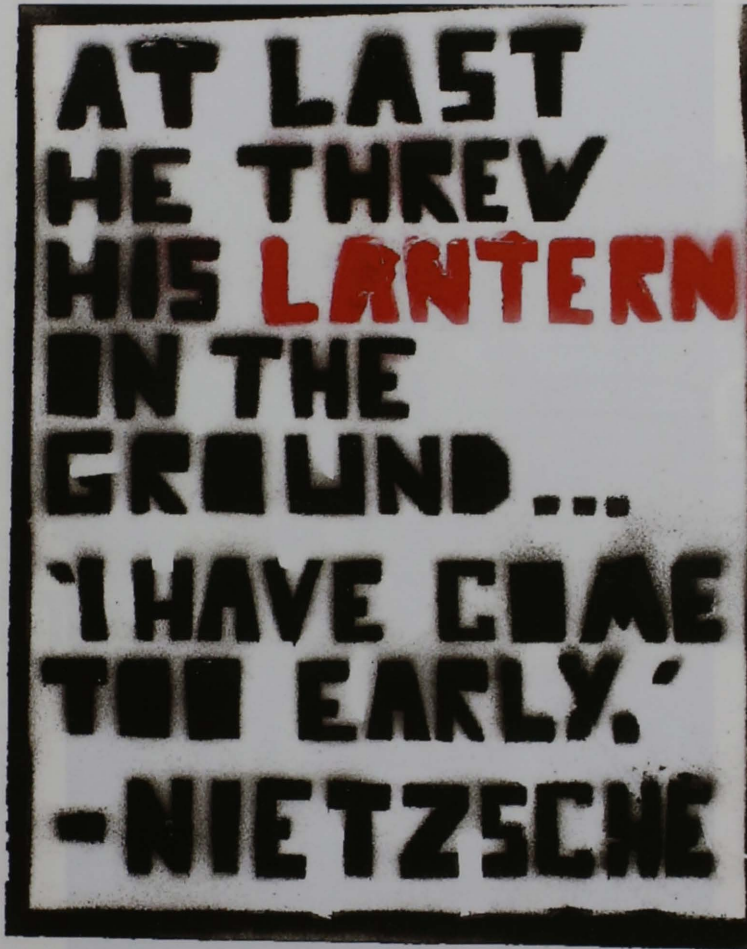


Noelle Goldcamp

Bark Glow

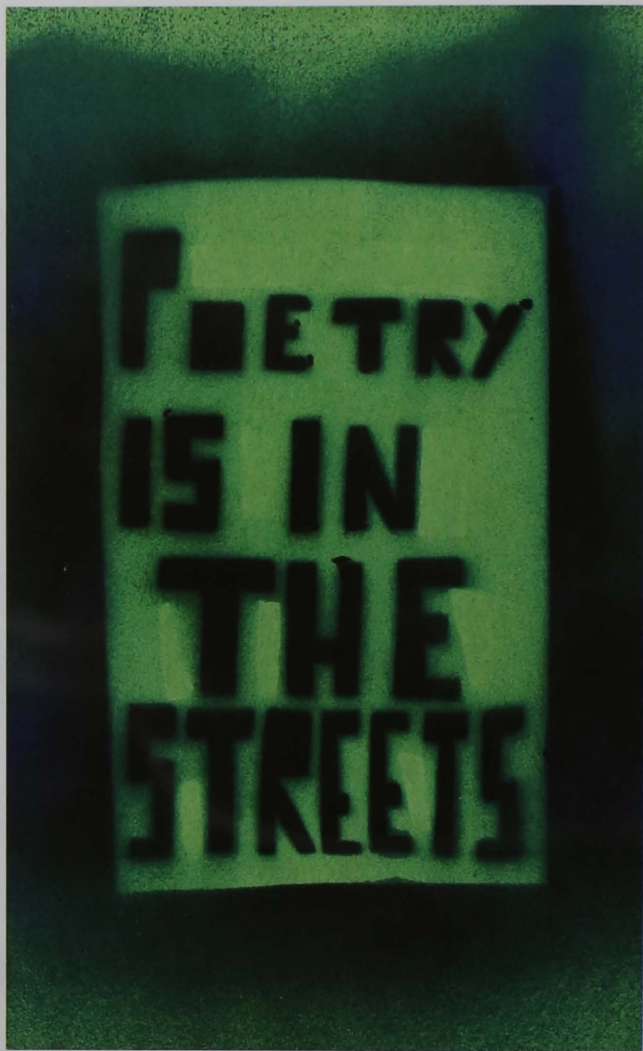


Major Works Anticipation

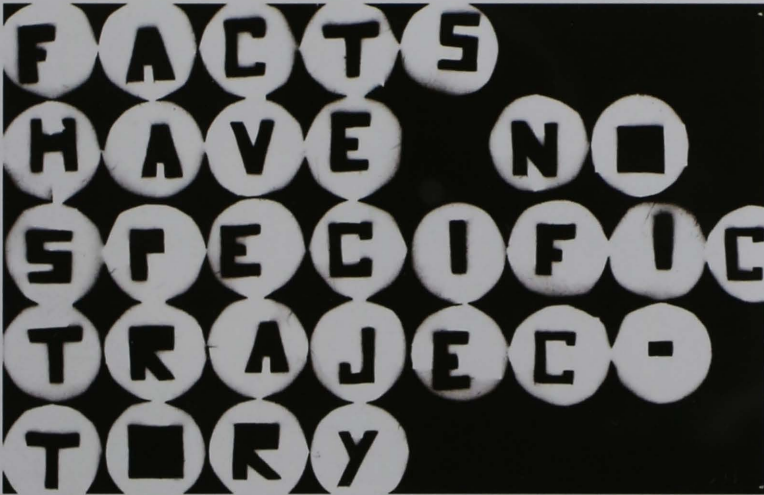


Nick Hanford

Look Up

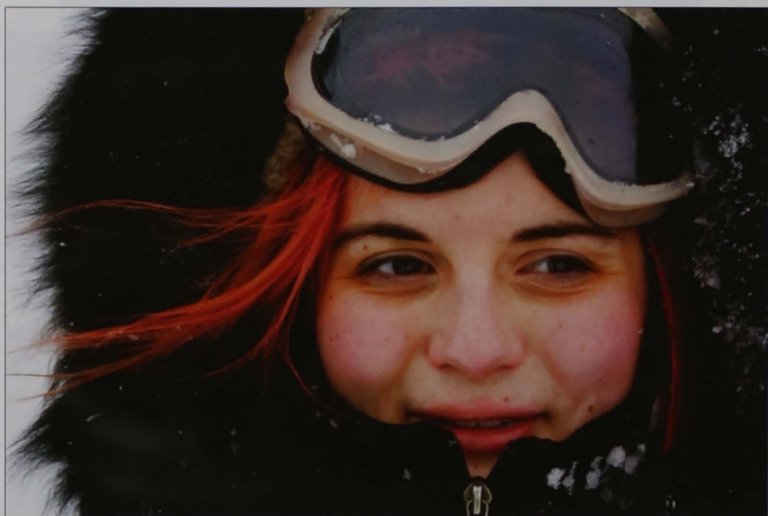


Major News Networks



James Harper

Others Wage War

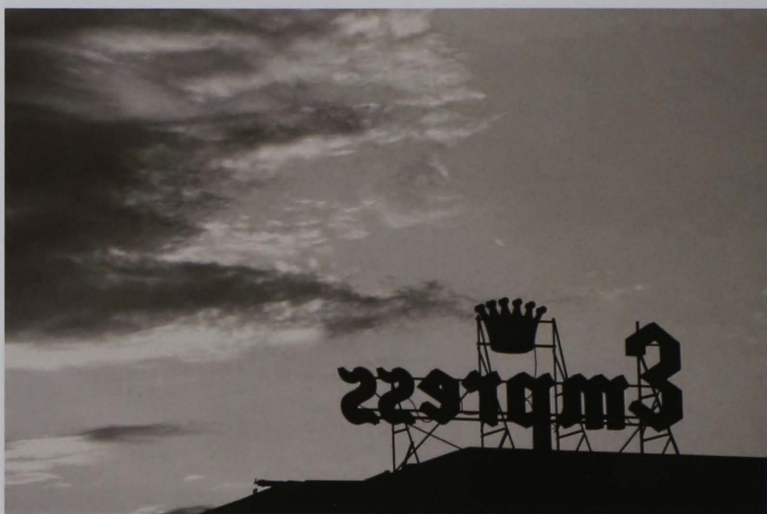


Insert Bible Verse Here



Lindsay Hogan

The Empress



Candy Castle



Josh Krigman

Venice, Italy



Kate Murphy

Quebec



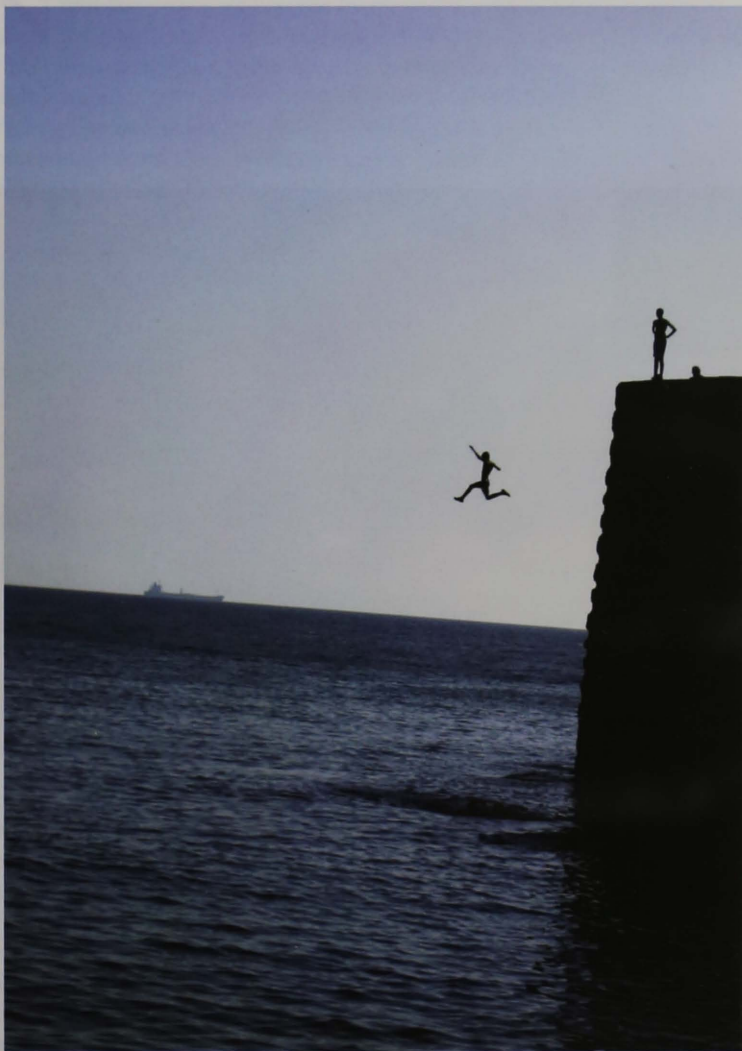
Arielle Ross

Bhutanese Child



Arielle Ross

Jumper



Pomegranates



Passing

Night had come, and so the black paved roads that ran parallel to the beach had cooled enough that the two of them could walk on the still-warm surface without burning their bare feet. Her grandson didn't mind, it seemed; he appeared quietly content with his soft ice cream. She had needed to kneel down to hand him his cone after receiving it from the vendor, her spider-veined knees straining from the light exertion and the sting of the coarse grain of the cement sidewalk. He grinned unawares, meeting her gaze while she ran her soft hands through his sun-stained hair, over the pale, unblemished skin of his forehead that never seemed to bronze during his time in the sun.

Continuing towards their home, his grandmother watched him turn the cone like the handle to the kite he flew on the beach, dragging his tongue around the base, dripping chocolate and vanilla on his nose so that she could take one of the napkins from her pocket and clean his face. *There*, she would say every time, grinning with gentle satisfaction, her dark eyes humming behind the frames of her glasses, beneath the untamed billows of her graying hair. Glimpses of his father, *her son*, flickered in his eyes like the breaks of light between the cars of a passing train. Studying his features, making guesses as to whether they were those of his mother or his father, was an inevitable occurrence during the time the two of them spent together. And yet, the other morning, she had proclaimed that he would have her nose, she was sure of it, and her family had looked and said no, they could not see it. In the bathroom that evening, she herself had searched for what she was sure had been there and could not find it.

Once they reached the family's beach house, she sent the young boy indoors to his grandfather, her fingers easing out from her pocket what would be her last pack of cigarettes. This was an oath she swore every year, this time hoping that, by the next vacation, she would be able to keep up with her grandson while they went cycling. Through the front window of the home, she could see him with his grandfather, revealed every few minutes by the inconsistent illumination of a Western on television. Her husband was most certainly asleep, slumped down and snoring into the boy's shoulder, whose eyes took in the events unfolding onscreen. There was John Wayne, he had been told to

remember, recognizing the reverence in his grandfather's tone without putting a name to it. He was the good guy: the one who didn't smile, the one who stood alone. The Indians died, but never bled, whereas the hero bled, but could not die.

The grandmother considered calling the boy outside, to stand with her and listen to the old stories of the night, the same stories she had recalled to his father when that man was a child: the faint and omniscient mumbling of the ocean, the aged toad clearing his throat under the porch, the inaudible chatter of the neighbors reminiscing about last year on the balcony next door. Eventually, she forgot all about retrieving her grandson, became distracted by her remembering and her nodding and the dying ember on the end of her cigarette.

The boy stirred in the shadow of the film's credits, shaking his grandfather. The man snorted and sighed heavily, sounding like the horses onscreen when their wounded cowboys somersaulted over their heads and were left in the dust as the chase carried on. The boy pulled himself out from under the weight of the old man's arm. He peeked over the couch, out the window and into the night, saw only a tiny orange glow in the darkness. He thought it was a ghost.

Sunday, November 27th

The wooden desk chair my mother lowered herself into that Sunday afternoon before I returned to college was passed onto me by my grandfather, from whom I had inherited my name. It is a name I am expected to pass on to my own children, I suppose, and it is a name that is reserved for moments in which my mother expects me to take her seriously. If my mother's lips spoke that name now, sitting across from my seat on my bed, it would mean that she understood what I had called her back into my room to tell her and would follow it with a question that would set me free; it would mean that I wouldn't have to say the words that I had practiced to myself alone in the car with the stereo off on my way home from work. It would mean I wouldn't have to recite those words which I had repeated- and repeated- to my timid reflection in the bathroom mirror when my eyes refused to believe what my fourteen-year old mind was only beginning to make sense of.

I don't act like a homosexual. My father would inform me of this a month later, the bemused tone of his voice refusing to betray the fear he will reveal as he takes off his glasses and diverts his stare towards the floor of his own bedroom. He is not present in our home as I study the stern smooth-wood walls of my bedroom while my mother yearns for an answer as to what could possibly prevent her son from meeting his own mother's eyes. I am trying to determine whether she already knows, attempting to assess how "gay" my bedroom is. This is not a new activity, but rather one that I have engaged in consistently for years now since the seventh grade. The flattering pictures of Cat Power and Meg White hanging over my dresser were once intentionally hung in prominent positions to imply an interest in women, but this is an effort I gave up on long ago when it became clear that it was something we just didn't have to talk about.

When my mother finally alleviates my silence, it is to ask me questions that would apply to the typical heterosexual teenager, questions involving women, drugs and alcohol. There is a cadence to her questions and my responses; we are checking off questions on a precautionary list. My mother grows progressively more reluctant as we continue and, when I meet her gaze, I can see in her eyes some unacknowledged truth surfacing, a sense of inevitability lingering in the

air around us. It is then that I realize that my mother is as afraid to speak those words as I am anxious to state them as a truth. Once these words are out, we cannot go back; we cannot keep on pretending that I will get married to a woman one day and settle down with children-children, whose names pay reverence to the men that came before me.

When the question finally stumbles out of her throat, it is bare and unaffected, like a verse that has been analyzed till it was robbed of all its meaning. I tell her yes, and the moment, previously suspended, allows me to breathe again. My muscles are no longer sore from strain, though I hadn't noticed they were aching until the pain had left me. I find myself smiling at the small absurdity of the moment as my hands collapse into my lap, shaking. I had never made it this far in my mind, and now my mother's expression is equally one of hurt as it is relief, her entire face sagging with a quiet sadness as I tell her this is something I have known, on my own, for years. She doesn't understand why I hadn't told her sooner. I would like to tell her that I tried to over and over again, but that would not be the truth. The truth is that I saw the excitement in her eyes when I asked a girl to a dance and I overheard my parents talking about how, since my sister didn't want to have kids, I would be the one that would bring them grandchildren. What a terrific father he will be, my relatives would say as I played with my younger cousins, minutes after my aunt referred to my uncle as a "fag" for not finishing his beer. How do I explain to my mother that my adolescence has been one entirely comprised of mixed signals? She would not be able to deny that, in tenth grade, when I lied to her and told her that I liked a girl named Danielle, she proudly embraced me, her eyes filled with tears.

I don't mention any of this to her. I tell her that I was always frightened that I would let down our family, that I was afraid I couldn't be the man my parents wanted me to be if I was gay. I tell her that, as a child, I had always thought that to be gay was to be weak and I did not want to be thought of that way. I remind her of the rhyme my grandmother once taught my sister and I as children: "It was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." None of it sounds very convincing. She doesn't cry. Admittedly, I want her to, because I guess, in some way, I want this to be a moment of payoff, with the swelling emotions of forgiveness and understanding that have been promised to me by the stories I see in film. I want it to feel like a step forward, like we are changing and growing and getting better and yet- I am *shaking*. I am

imagining my father's face when my mother tells him I am gay and was gay and will always be gay. I am imagining myself standing straight and strong and holding his gaze as he looks into my eyes to see if I truly believe it, and I *will* convince him that this is who I am. I just have not yet convinced myself.

A week or two after I speak with my father, I will cry for the first time in seven years. It is at a most inopportune moment, when I am alone with a girl whom I know I would love if I could, a girl with whom I could have children and a home, a girl with whom I could never be happy. She will tell me that I am good, that I am good, and I will say things that I do not mean. I will see the shadows of things that are not there. I will dream that I have fallen to the bottom of a well, that the floor has given out below me, that my bedroom is in the basement of a home I do not recognize. *I don't want anyone to hurt you*, my mother confesses to me, her voice soft and honest like the fingers that once tucked the hair behind my ear when it began to grow too long. I don't try to explain to her that the world isn't the one she raised me to fear, that people can be better than what she expects them to be, that sometimes the people who want you no harm are the ones that do you the most. Instead, I close my eyes, forgetting for a moment about the posters, the shelves of books I have not read, the sternness of the walls in this room I do not live in anymore and the weight of my grandfather's chair across from me. I want to remember what it felt like to be a child.

Elk Run II

So I get home late one night, rough day at work, and the old couple who live next to me, Mr. and Mrs. Ladenhop, say there's been a strange man lurking around the courtyard. They say they think he's from the Mews. Now, I live in a small condo complex called Elk Run II. The Mews is actually the Mechanicsville Mews, a strip of condos built in the seventies, a couple blocks down the road. Now I'm not saying where I live is super nice or anything but it's no Mews. We have nice green lawns surrounding each mini-complex and a small but adequately clean park up the path for children to play in. The Mews has gravel lawns and the thing they call a park is rusty and next to the 202 bypass. I also believe an old lady was knifed there once too. Now if I had children this is not the place where I would want them to enjoy their innocent days of childhood. This is why I bought a gun, okay? At Elk Run II we have a Neighborhood Board of which I am the Treasurer. At the Mews they have a crackhouse in one of the abandoned duplexes.

So I say: Well in what way was he strange?

And Mrs. Ladenhop sez: He was lurking around. I think he was from the Mews. He was black too.

And I'm like: Well it sort of sounds like he's from the Mews then. He must've gone back home it looks like. I then look around the courtyard and say: I don't see anybody.

And then Mrs. Ladenhop is like: We saw him walk up by the park. I know because I looked out the window because this gang of schoolboys was walking by and they were really loud. But then I saw this man just creeping around up the pathway. He just looked no good. I think he was a gang member.

And Mr. Ladenhop nods, grimly.

And so at this point I can see that they're worried and all so I tell them that I'll go take a look-see around the park just so everyone has a peace of mind. I'm real tired at this point because I think of all the work I've done at work and all the work that's still left to be done. Mr. Meyer's been on my tail about some mis-faxed reports that I didn't have anything to do with. I should be settling down with a beer right now but no, I do this because this is my complex, my neighborhood. I turn out

of our mini-complex and walk up the pathway to the park.

As I approach I can see two girls sitting inside the gazebo next to the swing set. Probably in their teens, whitish, but I don't recognize them. I get closer to them in the gazebo, passing the newly-planted arborvitae—a generous donation from the township for all the energy we saved last spring at a fundraiser—when all of a sudden I'm like, Whoa!

Behind the last arborvitae is the black guy just standing there. He's probably in his twenties I think. He's got this flat, wide-brimmed White Sox baseball cap on, with his hands in his pockets. And so at this point I'm still like: Whoa! Whoa!

It's sort of dusky and dark out now because of the shorter days and all so he's all dark and shady behind this arborvitae. I catch my breath and then am like: What's going on here?

And this black guy just sort of nods like nothing's going on here. And so I call to the whitish girls in the gazebo: Everything alright here?

And they like nod and say, Yeah we're cool here.

But something in me tells me this guy's just no good. He stares at me like I'm impeding his peeping or something. So I'm like: Are you with them? And I say this loud enough so the two girls can hear in the gazebo.

And he nods like I guess saying, Yeah I'm with them.

And this just really gets me. I mean, for some reason, this just really gets me. This guy comes into my neighborhood complex—he *trespasses* into my neighborhood complex just to act shady and all in our nice clean park? And then when I ask him a question he's all like nodding without saying anything? No sir, no siree, if anyone's gonna nod around here, it's the person who lives here, buddy.

So, real slow, I'm like: Are. You. With. Them?

And you know what this guy does? He nods again! He just nods with his mouth closed and his arms folded across his chest now. His arms folded across his chest! This guy thinks he can just come in here and just disobey and scare the people who *actually* live here, of which I am an extension, and then fold his arms too? Nope, nope, nope, this is just horrible.

To this I'm like, real quick: Do you live here?

And you know what this guy does? He nods! Only this time he nods like saying, No I don't live here, G. And this just gets me going.

I think about how this guy, who's probably never worked a day in his life, who's probably never put an honest day's work into anything but stealing TVs and selling crack, is going to come into my neighborhood complex, for which I've worked hard for, and come in here and start judging me and harassing me and start scaring the old folks like the Ladenhops or the teenage girls in the gazebo.

And then I think about the pistol in the inside pocket of my jacket. It's just sitting there right now. I could just bonk this basehead on the back of the head with the revolver end. Or if he gets physical and pulls his knife out on me I could just quickly pull the trigger and blam! his head flies off. No more nodding anymore douchebag, I would say. And the teen girls in the gazebo would rush over to me and be like: Thank you mister for taking care of that creep! We love you! And the old Ladenhops would rush over to me, skipping over his dead, un-nodding body and say: Thank you for giving us peace of mind! We love you! And Mr. Meyer, the next day, would be like: You did what? Forget about those mis-faxed reports! We need more take-charge men like you in upper-management! We love you!

But I don't take out my pistol. I just say, one more time: Are. You. With. Them? And then I point to the girls, who are just staring at us from the gazebo. Their faces all lit up from their cellphones.

All this time, this black guy is like, arms folded, staring at me like I'm just something normal, like TV or something. So I shake my head like saying, Well?

And then finally he sez: Yeah.

And I'm like: Alright, see? What's the big deal? Just answering a simple question is all.

So I give the two whitish girls in the gazebo a last look and give this black guy one last stern look and head back up the pathway to my mini-complex. At this point it's chilly, so I bundle my jacket around me tighter and feel the shape of the pistol on my chest.

When I get back to my condo the Ladenhops are already out on their front porch. They say: Well, did you find him? Did you? Should we call the police?

And I'm so tired I'm just like: He's gone.

And they smile and Mr. Ladenhop pats me on the back like saying, I couldn't have done what you did, so thank you.

And then Mrs. Ladenhop gives me a pie she sez she baked last week and put away into the freezer because her son never came to pick

it up. I say no, no, that's your pie but she doesn't listen and hands me the frozen pie in a cold tin.

It's chocolate mousse.

I eat it with some milk and like three Red Bulls and then go to bed.

The next day we find graffiti all over the Elk Run II display sign by the road. It's been defaced with ghetto talk and phrases like, Sowthside Rulz! And this just infuriates me being the Treasurer of the Elk Run II Neighborhood Board because people here hate being asked for more money to buy a new sign. Something like this happened a few years ago when Carl Soloski from Complex 3 drove drunk one night and rammed his car into the original Elk Run II sign. Signs like this cost a pretty penny and people work hard for their money. I doubt the township will buy a new one for us seeing as this is strike two.

It's pretty obvious who did this, I think to myself. It just goes to show you that when you stand up for what you believe in, you stand up for your home, you get graffiti'd all over. And then you have to shell out the cash to wash and fix it yourself. And by the time you do that you're already hosed. But no, I say! No. This will not stand, I think to myself. This is my neighborhood.

So later that night I go to the Mews and I sit in my car and wait in the visitor's parking lot, which is really an extension of the parking lot of Tunic, a small grungy Moroccan restaurant. Finally, I see him: the black guy. With him are the two whitish girls from the gazebo. They're walking on the side of the street, lit up by their cellphones. He's walking about ten feet behind them, sort of waggling along. So I get out of my car and follow them the rest of the way into the Mews complexes.

The Mews is ugly and maze-like. The condos are made from this old orangish brick that's just hideous. Nothing like the white side-panel and stucco of Elk Run II. How do people live here is what I think when I see the dead grass and busted mailboxes and cigarette butts on the side of the road. Their condo is the last in a row of ugly orange blocks next to a field with a broken down, rusted truck stuck in it.

I watch them as they go in.

So as not to be conspicuous-looking I bunch my shoulders up and pop my jacket collar around my head so no one can see who I am or that I'm white. I wait outside for a good ten minutes, sitting on the sidewalk across the street. I wait for an old Mexican man and his ratty-

looking dog to pass by and then I make my way to the side of the duplex. There's a stained dirty window on that side and so I peer through.

And there they are: the three of them. They're like eating old Chinese or something. They got a dingy light on in there that sort of flickers in and out occasionally. They look talky and smiley. They look guilty, I think. And then I get a little hot under the collar. I've worked a full day's work and I come home and I have to sit out here in the cold while they're in there eating and drinking and being flipping merry and whatnot? That should be me! They should be the ones looking in at me through a window and being like, God, he's got it good! But they don't do this! They just hog the pleasant gazebo in our nice park and then when confronted about this, they deface our display sign! That's just classless if you ask me!

No, this will not stand, I say in my head. Them being happy in that old dingy kitchen while people in my neighborhood are fearing for their safety and homes just will not stand!

So I think about going in and taking out my gun and waving it around and maybe even shooting it off. Giving them a good scare and whatnot. I think about bonking them all over the head with the snub-nosed end until they're crying for mercy and then I'd be like: This is what you get! This is what you get! And then bonking them all again. And saying again: This is what you get!

But something stops me from doing all that. I look inside at the three of them and just watch them for a couple minutes. I see them laugh and talk, probably about how well they graffiti'd our sign. They look happy to me. Like they don't care if they don't got what they don't got, which sort of irks me. I work hard and I have a small house that I take care of and I never smile. And why should they smile and I shouldn't? Yeah? I mean like, they're in there all smiling and talking and sharing in a horrible smelly dump and I'm out here, in the cold, looking in. And I don't mean that I *never* smile. I smile when good things happen to me and all. I smile then. But to be smiling with nothing is just stupid.

No! I think. This is no way to live. Why should they smile and I shouldn't? Because they have nothing? Is that why they smile? Because I have everything? Is that why I don't smile?

No! I think again. Time to make a stand for me. I will not take this. We will not take this!

I think about the people at my complex at Elk Run II. They're happy and smiling and playing with their kids because they feel safe at Elk Run II. Because it's a safe place. People cry when they don't feel safe and all. But there's also a lot of crying going on at Elk Run II. I hear old Mrs. Ladenhop crying sometimes in like a little-old-lady-whimper because, you know, old people get lonely and such. And I hear the Butkus' fighting at night and their kids crying and then smack! whack! slap! etc. etc. And then more crying. And then I look in at the three of them in this beat, old house. Would they smile if they didn't feel safe?

So I take my pistol and wrap it in my grip. I go to the front of the house and stand by the front door for a second or two. My heart jogging and all in my chest. I open the squeaky front door very quietly. I peer into the brown, dingy interior. It's drafty inside. My heart sort of skips a beat. I hold the end of the pistol out into nothing in particular into what I guess is they're foyer.

I wait a second and then pull the trigger.

The sound is loud and dumb metallic in my ears. I have never shot this pistol before. My hearts skips a second beat but this time it feels like an air inside of me. Like a wind. And before I know it, I flee.

I flee so fast I don't even close their door. I can hear its hinges weeping behind me in the night. That's the only thing I hear. I flee to my car in the Tunic parking lot up the street. I flee the Mews. I flee so fast I don't even remember turning the ignition and driving away, far off, to my home. And somewhere in all that fleeing, I find myself passing through so much light and streaky neon and then no-light, and then darkness, and then night, trying to touch it all and feeling nothing and nothing and nothing.

Shady Tides

1.

Let me tell you some things. I've got stories that will make your hair stand scared! Let me tell you how I used to be. I used to be some deadbeat. I'm no deadbeat now. I'm changed! This is not how a *deadbeat* talks. This is not how a *loser* talks. A *loser* doesn't talk. He watches TV! He doesn't have anything to say. I used to watch TV. I never used to say anything but, Uh and Oh and Uh-Huh and Like. I don't talk like that anymore. Employers want to hear you speak. They want to hear enunciation. I ee-nun-see-ate. I do this because I'm not a *deadbeat*. Got it? I used to be but I'm not anymore. I've changed things in my life. I'm making something for my family, yeah? That's not what a deadbeat does.

I used to sleep in, get up late, watch TV and eat. I used to wait until after five for Nancy—that's my wife—to come home from her shift at the Twin Pines Diner to take care of Ritchie Jr. and Tina—that's my kids—and then go back for the graveyard shift. The kids would cry and yell and say, Daddy we're hungry and we've crapped our diapers and I'd just sit there on the couch watching TV, crapping *my* diaper. My diaper of life!

Yeah, I'd sit around and loaf in front of the TV and Nancy would be like, Why don't you watch the Job Channel instead of the crap you watch? And I'd say something inarticulate like, Uh-huh honey and then reach for another handful of JuJu Chew and wash it down with a Big Gulp. My feeling was, We live like we do and there's nothing we can do to change it so it's all just meant to be. But you know what? I was wrong! Dead wrong! And if you are like I was then, crapping everything in life and whatnot, then I say to you: Change your crappy self and be like me!

If you don't, bad things will happen. My advice is look to things that love you, not to the things you love. Which is what I heard Pastor Paul talk about on one episode of *Priest PhD*. Look to the ones who love you, he said.

2.

And I do look to the ones who love me. I look at Nancy and how hard

she's worked for years. Plenty of shifts at the Diner. Graveyard shifts. Nights away from Ritchie Jr. and Tina. She's got this sciatica thing going on. And that makes me want to work like super hard for my family before my Number's up. That's all I ever want to do now is work till my bones show and my heart coughs out. Because I've been away for so long from my family yet so close. It's like Elsa, the Mystic to the Stars, sez: Everyone's equidistant to the stars. Which means they're neither close nor far.

See like there are big moments in a man's life when he is forced to reexamine everything he thought he once knew. Real big moments. Intervention is what the folks on TV call it. Where everything is reexamined and how everyone tells you how much they really love you. There are shows about this type of thing. You see this on like *Joe Doctor* and *Points of You*. This is what I am talking about. Someone down on their luck, crapping on their own life and others, is lifted by some divine force, through the love of friends and family, into changing that crappy shade of themselves they were once too ashamed or crap-faced to look at.

I guess this moment came for me when I was sitting in the drive thru lane for Happy Pappy's. See, I see it as a sign that what happened was supposed to happen because I *never* go to Happy Pappy's. I'm a McDonald's man. Or Wendy's. Or sometimes Burger King. But never Happy Pappy's. Except for this one time. See, they got this extra-small drive thru lane that's like sort of a tunnel you drive through to get to where you order. The whole shtick at Happy Pappy's is California Gold Rush stuff and so the drive thru is meant to be like this mineshaft type deal. So I go through this drive thru tunnel and it's dark inside and my Daewoo is like really close to the sides of the drive thru tunnel. And then as I'm pulling up to the menu board somehow a quarter gets loose and falls like out the window and I go to reach for it by sticking my head out the window because, you know, my family needs every quarter. Well, big mistake! As I'm dangling my head out the window, trying to get leverage, I push real hard on the gas pedal and my head gets stuck between my Daewoo and the drive thru tunnel paneling. On reflex I guess I press down hard on the pedal again and it only hurts for a second before my head sort of does a butter smear all over the side of the drive thru paneling. So much blood! And then there's people screaming and kids crying and police sirens. To be honest the thing I remember most is getting up to the menu board, blood soaking down

my chest and the inside upholstery, and hearing: Welcome to Happy Pappy's! Home of the Heart of Gold! What can I get for you?

The police later chalked it up to "auto-drive thru malfeasance" and told me to see a doctor. We tried a lawsuit against Happy Pappy's but that was just heartbreak. We lost and left with less money than we came with which sucks considering all those commercials for accident lawyers who'll fight for you when no one else will and blah blah blah. I see even less-off people getting paid big time in those commercials. Like we're supposed to know the danger of fast food drive thrus! It sort of just shows you, like, the failed court system and all but Oh well! I guess is what I should say.

It wasn't until my doctor's appointment that the full reality of this life-changing opportunity given to me set in full. I went to my family doctor, Dr. Tommy, and got what some people may think of as bad news. Good thing I'm not some people! First, he said I was lucky because I could still speak, even though it was through my esophagus pipe, which sort of makes me sound like Morgan Freeman, which gives me a new perspective on life, like, for instance, now I know what it feels like to be black! And I could still see and hear because of this Phantom Head Syndrome thing where the sensations of seeing and hearing are like replicated by deeply profound hallucinations. But then the bad news:

It looks like you've got about a month, he said.

And I said: Oh jeez...

What with not having a mouth to feed and all, he said, I'd say mortal hunger and starvation will begin to set in in about a month, er, *month*.

And then, like shocked, I said: Mortal hunger and starvation?

And then Dr. Tommy said: You know, a cockroach can live for weeks without a head. They'd be able to survive a nuclear apocalypse, did you know that? Bombs could be dropping like so much confetti at a wedding and those little buggers would still survive. Did you know that?

No, I said and then tried to taste in the area where my mouth used to be.

Then Dr. Tommy said: Okayzers, without a copay it looks like today will be \$120.

And so I paid and left Dr. Tommy's office with my ex-head area swimming.

I'll admit now, hearing that the first time was tough: *a month*. No

one likes to hear they've got an expiration date. But I'm changed now. Sometimes you have to stop thinking about the destination and start thinking about the road to that destination. At least that's what Dr. Joe sez on his TV show.

So I started to think about the road ahead. How much I slobbered and crapped my life away was in the past and gone. I did bad by my kids and I did bad by Nancy. And now Nancy and the kids cry because of my no-head situation, which hurts even more. So I said to myself, alone in the bathroom reapplying gauze to my neck, This will not stand! I live in America and there's always second chances in America!

You know, it is true what they say, you gotta get out of your own head sometimes to see the forest for the greener grass on the other side.

3.

Shady Tides is the last remaining farm in these parts. There used to be tons of them, but they just took up too much space, I guess. Shady Tides is preserved by the NPS because they clone the best fish. They're a fish farm. They clone salmon and trout and anchovies and red snapper, etc. etc. They do this behind the Big Silo in the back of the farm. In big tanks. The rest of the farm is kept just so to look like a real farm even though it technically hasn't been functional for a decade or so, I think. It's a nostalgia thing. The biggest attraction though, besides the Cloned King Crab Tank Tour every spring, the one that brings in all the clams, is the Shady Tides Haunted Hayride.

See, I'm just flipping through the Job Channel one night, sort of feeling down about my not-having-a-job-situation, but not totally because I'm me and I see this opening that sez, Headless Horseman Wanted! No experience necessary! Please, NO phone calls! And it gave me an address to Shady Tides, which is on the far side of Downtown near Lake Como and so right then and there I silently thanked some divine light of intervention for guiding me.

This was where I met Mr. Wiggins. Mr. Wiggins is a tall man with thick Cokebottle glasses that distort his eyes and make him look kind of witchy and buggy. He loves clams. Mr. Wiggins, as I came to find out, runs the day-to-day operations of Shady Tides. He works for the presiding corporate owner, some conglomerate-or-another. But anyway, as I should say, the day I met him I said to myself, That's where I'm going to be someday, but hey, you have to start somewhere!

So I went into his office that day and he said: Shady Tides Haunted Hayride is about fear. Fear is how we drum up clams, understand? Clams! I want clams! You get the customers scared enough, pee their pants enough, get those teenage girls to scream enough, etc., they will want to come back to the Shady Tides Haunted Fair to shell out their clams! Get it? Your job would be to scare and intimidate. And if necessary, whisper that Shady Tides Kettle Corn is half-off and goes well to wash down with some Shady Tides Haunted Lemonade, understand?

And I said: I'm the best candidate for this job, sir! Just give me a chance and I'll scare the pants off of those hayriders!

Now how do you feel about danger in the workplace? Mr. Wiggins said. Can we rely on you to be a silent and conformitive member of the Shady Tides family?

I love responsibility sir, I said. And I know for sure that I can be a comfortable member of the Shady Tides family! I'll fit right in! I love *doing*, sir!

Mr. Wiggins then said: Do you have a family?

And I said: Yes sir.

Would you throw your body in front of a malfunctioning tractor to save them? Mr. Wiggins said.

Absolutely, I said. Now I would.

Legally, I'm supposed to tell you about our last headless horseman, Mr. Wiggins said. He was kicked in the head by the horse and died. Nothing real big.

I love horses! I said. And I don't mind if I get kicked in the head sir, because I don't have one.

Then Mr. Wiggins smiled and shook my hand.

And I said: Sir, I'm willing to do anything for this job. I need this job sir. For my family sir.

Well now you have two families, Mr. Wiggins said.

And that was how I became Headless Horseman #2.

4.

When I told Nancy she yipped like in glee and said that she was proud of me for sticking with this whole job thing even after everything I've been through. And I told her that I was going to earn enough money so that her and Ritchie Jr. and Tina could live nice after I mortally starved to death. After she put her arms around me it made me pretty proud

and I thought, I love you, I love you, and then I said to her, I love you.

I went in to tell Ritchie Jr. and Tina the good news but they had already fallen asleep and so I watched them for a little while. I wondered how they'd grow up. If, maybe, they could grow up fast in this month so I could see how they'd be as adults. But then I thought, No, never wish a kid to grow up, that's just a horrible thing to do. They'll have a whole lifetime to work hard, like me, for themselves and for their mother, and for their kids and so on. And so I blew them each a kiss with my hand.

Dr. Tommy sez that to stave off the mortal starvation for as long as possible I should pop an M&M down my throat pipe every once and awhile. So I do. I pop it down the pipe where I think my esophagus should be and can feel it jiggle and wriggle down me and then go kerplunk! into my stomach. Yes, I know, it is not a pleasant experience.

Sometimes when I'm at Shady Tides I can smell the variety of food that they put out in the Shady Tides Haunted Fair area. I can smell the Shady Tides Spooky Fish-Paste Funnel Cakes and the Haunted Cheeseburgers and the Spider Cider and the Filleted Fish Sticks and the Finger Fries with ketchup for blood all at once. It's like extra-sensational. Like the food is being baked within me. The smells just pass through me and waft inside me like a barbecue of hunger. And with each waft of funnel cake or cheese fries my stomach growls and I get this intense pain in my side and I have to stop for a moment and take a deep, chesty breath before I can go on.

I sometimes hallucinate in these instances. I see things. I see ghosts. I see dead people. Bloody and crying. People with hands worked to the bone. Bones like splinters. They reach out to me, like saying, Come, come, come! And the marbled dizziness! Oh boy! And then I wake up in the dressing trailer, smelling like tractor gas and neck wound.

Sometimes I don't think I'll last a month. Other times I think, What have I been missing? Why did I slob and deadbeat the hours away. So much space and grid of smell and senses right in front of me it makes me want to cry, if I could cry, and I think, before it wafts away into the wheeling autumn night sky, I'll miss this.

5.

So one Friday I'm called in because Mr. Wiggins sez they like to have two horsemen on Fridays and Saturdays just in case and also to spell Derek for a couple rides.

Derek is Headless Horseman #1. Derek is a senior at Twin Pines High. He's a "big-man-on-campus" type. Or so I'm told.

He is pretty cool, I'll admit. He's got a thick dew of blonde hair and looks like he could be some type of ad model for the Gap or Walmart. Although the Mexicans who work at Shady Tides call him a pretty boy, my thought is, and forgive my French: Hey, he's Horseman freakin' number one! So give him a break!

The Mexicans at Shady Tides are all sort of like that. Not all of them are Mexican, like, for instance, Angel and Javi are Guatemalan and Gomez is Panamanian. We just call them the Mexicans because it's just easier. They're always crapping on people behind their backs, in broken English, more Spanish than English. Even though they are nice to me, I still think they should just do their work, say nothing, and go home to their trailers in the bog behind the Cloned Anchovy Reserves. The Mexicans are Shady Tides' corporate secret. Everyone knows they're illegal but Mr. Wiggins sez: If you tell anyone about them you would be hurting the integrity of the system! Got that Shoulders!?

He calls me Shoulders as a term of endearment.

So it's this one Friday right and I'm getting ready with Derek in one of the trailers in the bog, which is really Gomez's home. Gomez is actually Mexican, I think. Gomez works the Cloned Snapper Reserves, making sure the tanks keep fresh and clean by spraying them with some Clorox concentrate.

We're watching a bad soap opera in Gomez's trailer-home because that is all the Mexicans seem to watch. Gomez sez this is how he learned English. Through American TV.

So we're watching this bad soap opera, getting ready, when Derek sez to me: Hey Shoulders?

And I say: Yes Derek!

I'm goin' to Lake Como tonight with my girl, he sez. Can you cover for me?

But you're Headless Horseman number one Derek! I say.

And he sez: Who gives a shit? I'm goin' skinny dipping with my girl tonight. I'm gonna bang her. And I don't want to waste another fuckin' night at this piece of shit job.

But Derek, I say, you're Headless Horseman #1. I just couldn't—

And then he cuts me off and sez: My retarded cousin could do this job. And for seven-fifty and hour, I ain't *not* gonna get laid by my

girlfriend.

But what about the money? I say.

My parents are loaded, retard, he sez, doing his ad model laugh that he does. Listen, you gonna do this or you gonna be a little bitch?

Because I am me and for Nancy and Ritchie Jr. and Tina, I say: Yes Derek! I'll make you proud! And I'll make Shady Tides proud too!

And Derek sez: That's fuckin' great. Just don't do anything to get me fired, retard.

So I get *extra*-ready. Making sure my neck-wound is scary enough and all. Lighting my pumpkin that I will wield with scary intent, getting it ready, etc. etc. I have to take the football pads out of Derek's cloak because, really, I do not need them. I put on my cape, buckle my boots, and then find the plastic sword that I will use to scare the hayriders. I cut the air with it a couple times, real swift, like I would if I really was a Headless Horseman. Which I am not!

I call Gomez on the walkie-talkie. He comes to pick me up on his busted old ATV that the Mexicans use to get around the farm and he takes me to Position #1 in Cornfield #6, which is the biggest of the cornfields and the best. But hey, I ain't bragging!

In, like, a broken Spanglish, Gomez sez what I think amounts to: You ready muchacho?

And I say: Oh yeah boy!

And he laughs. Which sort of gets me. It's this really deep, guttural laugh that you might do when you're laughing at something really funny, not just faking it. And I wonder, Why is he laughing at me?

But it doesn't matter once I'm in Position #1 in Cornfield #6. The night is cool and chilly. Neon lights from the stage where live music plays in the Fair area shines in the distance behind a sparsely-wooded bit of land behind the Big Silo, making an X-ray of the trees. I hear some echoed screams, teenage girls no doubt, coming from TerrorWood, up around the bend.

My chest is beating fast. A scythe of moon in the sky. Perfect hayride night. And I'm the perfect Headless Horseman for such a perfect hayride night, I think to myself. Scare them, is my mission.

Only I don't get my chance because it starts to rain and a kid gets literally shocked in the Shock-Till-U-Drop level of the Haunted House and so Mr. Wiggins has to shut the whole thing down for the night.

Legal reasons, he sez.

When I get home, Nancy is already there, feeding Ritchie Jr. and Tina din-din. She sez she got someone to cover for her at the Diner and how happy she is to get home so early and how she doesn't need to go back until midnight. Then she asks me how my evening was and why I'm home so early and how come I have such droopy shoulders and I tell her. She sez not to worry, I'll get another chance, keep my shoulders up, and then she also asks if I want to fool around.

I say yes more so to please her but inside I'm really just thinking about Shady Tides. My big shot, etc. etc. Nancy places Ritchie Jr. and Tina into their playpen and we go upstairs. And as Nancy begins to undress me and I begin to feel her up, I think about the feel of the coolness of night sky on my skin and the echoes of those sweet teenaged screams and what I would have done and how I would have done it and the glow of the stars and the smell of tractor gas.

6.

The week after, Mr. Wiggins calls me into his office. He calls Derek in too.

He sez: Derek. Shoulders.

And I say: Yes sir.

I need you to be aware of something, he sez. That is, only if it comes up.

Yes sir, I say. I'm all ears.

And he lets out chuckle-hiss thing that sounds more like dead leaves over pavement. Then he sez: Remember I told you about the previous Headless Horseman we, uh, employed here in previous years?

The one who got his head busted in? sez Derek, sipping on a Big Gulp.

Yes, Mr. Wiggins sez. It seems there's some talk around the other workers that...well...he's reappeared. *Potentially* reappeared.

Reappeared? I ask.

Awesome, sez Derek.

Name was Romero, Mr. Wiggins sez, looking at some paperwork. Quiet Mexican type. Some of our workers seem to think he's haunting the Haunted Hayride. In parts of it and such.

Like a ghost? I ask.

Who knows really, Mr. Wiggins sez. All I'm saying is it's unconfirmed as of now. You know how these types of workers can be—superstitious and all.

So what the hell you want us to do? asks Derek, sipping on his Big Gulp.

Just keep an eye out, sez Mr. Wiggins. And if either of you see anything out of the ordinary, report directly to me. Clear?

Yes sir! I say.

Okay, got it, sez Derek. Look for a ghost at a haunted hayride. No problem.

7.

So I ask Gomez about this, right, okay? Cause, now, I'm the type of guy who likes to know what he's dealing with. I'm the type of guy now that you see on TV and the movies that likes to know where a flipper like this eats, sleeps, and craps. If you catch my drift.

In my mind, you can't just lose a job because you sucked at it and then expect to come back, looking for that same job. No sir, no siree, buddy boy deadbeat slob. I'm Headless Horseman #2 and Derek is Headless Horseman #1 and when Derek graduates high school and goes away to college, then I'm Headless Horseman #1, got it! Get the picture!?

There's a hierarchy. A ladder of which we climb and if you can't cut it out and climb it, then get off the stick, shaky, because there's another who will. I'm paraphrasing Mr. Wiggins of course. He sez to me sometimes: Always be ready for anything Shoulders cause we're not paying you seven-fifty a pop to loaf around. To which I reply: I am not a loaf, Mr. Wiggins. To which he replies: Then go out and scare me up some clams, Shoulders.

Mr. Wiggins calls money "clams."

So, as I was saying, I go to Gomez and ask him about Romero, about this ghost thing and whatnot.

So? I ask.

And Gomez sez something like: If you die anger then no peace like come you way.

What do you mean "anger"? I ask.

And then he sez something like: Com-*hing* over, manys dead. My father dies in the sand. Heat too much. In the desert. And *hees* body left in the sand. Very anger.

Yeah, so? I say.

He comes to me, Gomez sez, and mines family. He anger. But I tells *heem*. I work for you father. And he still anger. But I work heres

anyway. And he stills very anger.

Oh yeah, I say. Well then what does he do?

And Gomez sez: He make many tortilla go stale. And he make my mother cry.

And then I think of Nancy crying for some reason. Over me. And this gets me. And before I choke up I say to Gomez: Okay, yeah, whatever. Just go and get me my M&M please. Thank you.

And Gomez goes off on his busted ATV.

I don't get a chance to be Headless Horseman #1 tonight but it's okay because it's payday. I come home and place my check in the broken cookie jar in the shape of a pumpkin on top of the refrigerator. In three weeks of work, I've earned a smidge under a grand, including tips, of which I get from working the Fish Stick stand on weeknights.

I tell Nancy that she should keep working at the Diner so that when she puts her clams with the clams I've earned at Shady Tides she'll have all the more clams for when I'm gone.

But I don't want to think about that, she sez.

You have to, I say. I have to think about how I'm going to provide for you and Ritchie Jr. and Tina and you have to think about being strong. Okay? That's the way things work. And when I'm gone and your time is up, the kids will take care of all that and be strong because you were there for them. Okay? So be strong, okay? As long as we work, everything will be okay.

Then Nancy nods and asks me if I want to be cremated or buried and I say, Whichever is cheaper. We have to start thinking cheaply now. That's how we work our way up.

And then she sez she's going to check on the kids.

8.

On the second to last weekend of Shady Tides' Haunted Festivities, I have a religious experience. Okay, yes, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: This guy's got the life of Riley. He doesn't just get one life-changing experience, he gets two! No way! No way, is what you're thinking but yes way! Yes way! Okay! I know I am blessed and that is why I am where I am. But everyone's blessed in one way or another. It's what you do with those blessings that determines how you end up, in this life and the next, and the next, and the next, etc. At least that's what Dr. Joe sez on *Joe Doctor*. Or maybe Pastor Paul sez this. Either way, it's true.

So I'm getting ready to back up Derek one night. In Gomez's trailer. It's cool out. The World Series is on the TV. Derek is sipping a Red Bull, yelling for a two-out base hit.

I say: Derek, do you believe in ghosts?

Yeah, he sez, and the Easter Bunny too, dickhead.

And then I say: You think our jobs are safe? I mean, cause, like, I need this job.

Fucking balls! he yells. Fucking strikeout?! Omifuckingod!

When it comes to Derek, my thought is, you're blessed Derek, but what are you doing with your life? Maybe it's an age thing. Maybe the beauty of youth blinds us, like they say on that TV show *Better With Age*. Maybe there's just so much banging to do and so much lusting when you're young that this type of stuff isn't important. But it is Derek, it is.

Then Derek sez he doesn't feel like working tonight and that he wants to bang his girlfriend and so I say sure, yeah, I'll be Headless Horseman #1 tonight, yes!

I get extra-ready. I make my neck-wound scary, although that doesn't take long because now it's just a gray, smelly, vesicular stump, so A-okay! I take out Derek's football pads out of his cloak and make sure the pumpkin that I wield is extra-scary. I put some fake-blood on it, like running from its mouth, like a vampire. Then I walkie-talkie Gomez to come and pick me up on his busted ATV.

You ready muchacho? is what I think he asks.

Oh yeah boy, I say.

Gomez drops me off at Position #1 in Cornfield #6. He whizzes off in his ATV through the path up to TerrorWood. I hear screams in the distance. The sky is glowing in that autumn sort of way, like the afterglow of a neon sign, like an EXIT sign you'd see in a movie theater, etc. etc.

I'm standing there in Position #1 in Cornfield #6 when I hear this humming sound. Not like a tractor. More like just noise. A humming sort of white noise. And to this naturally I'm like, Shut up noise! I'm trying to hear here! But it doesn't stop. And it gets louder until I see him, in the stalks of the fake plastic corn. Romero. He looks like a ghost. He's crab-pale and the left side of his face is pretty well kicked in and there's this steady swell of blood. His eyes are just black and they look into me, like literally *into* me and I feel everything he feels.

At first I think I'm just having another hallucination caused by

my third-stage starvation but I feel conscious and the pain of those eyes hurt too flipping much for me to not be awake.

I see things. His things. His brother, a sun-eaten corpse in a desert. Hands that don't look like hands but fish bones. I see long stretches of road that come from nothing and go into nothing. I feel an intense, sharp pain in my back, like lifting rocks, broken concrete. I feel the thud! of the horse's kick to the left side of his face. I see Mr. Wiggins looking over him.

He talks to me. Okay? I know now what you're thinking. You're thinking: Oh boy, this guy's loony. He's straight loopy. He's a nutjob. But no! I say. No! He tells me things about me and Nancy and Ritchie Jr. and Tina. He tells me things about the future. When he talks, it sounds like he's asking me questions: *You will die taking out the trash one night? Ritchie Jr. will get diabetes when he's twelve? He dies in the dialysis chair? Tina will get pregnant at sixteen and give it away? Nancy will work in the Twin Pines Diner for thirty more years until she dies of a stroke in the middle of waiting a table? At the place where Nancy will spread your ashes a Pomeranian will piddle on you and then a mall will be built?*

And yes, I'll admit I have a moment of weakness. I say to him: But what about everything I'm doing now for them, my family? These things have to make a difference, right? If I work hard, for them, good things come, right? Laura on *Points of You* sez: You can make anything come true!

But he doesn't say anything. I hear a tractor pulling up around the bend and he disappears. I get on my horse. She bucks a little but I hold tight. The sound of the tractor is grating. It cuts through the sheet of cold in the air. I hear it pulling up but I can't move myself. Nothing can move me.

This that I wanted for so long. To prove what I could do. To be able to give those people, who've paid their hard-earned money to see me, the scare of their life. To reward Mr. Wiggins' faith in me. To show them that I'm no slob or loser or deadbeat. That I don't crap around. But I just can't move.

I hear the tractor stop and at this point I'm supposed to nudge the horse so she nays a little bit to make it spooky and all. But I can't. A couple minutes go by and I can see driver on the tractor flash his flashlight like saying, What the *hell* man! But I'm just stuck in Position #1, amongst the fake stalks of corn, and I can hear the hayriders and their mumbling. I hear one teenager say: This is fucking scary...fake

corn...fucking great. I hear another hayrider say: Well this is not what I paid for. This is not scary at all! And then the tractor revs up with disappoint and heads down the bend and out of sight.

And that's how it ends for me.

9.

I quit that night. Call me an Ichabod if you want but I had to quit. I decided I had to quit Shady Tides before all my tortilla starts to go stale. I don't want my kids' tortilla to go stale either. I don't tell Nancy about Romero. I don't tell anyone about Romero because, really, what's there to tell? *Hey honey, guess what? We're all just going to keep on living how we're living and then die?* No. I don't want to scare her. I'm tired of scaring. Because I'm scared! I thought I knew stuff! I thought I did but I don't! And every time she looks at me and smiles or sez something like, Can you take out the trash? I think of her keeling over on someone's club sandwich at the Diner. I think of Ritchie Jr. dying scared and unconscious in the dialysis chair. I think of Tina, babyless and alone. And then I cry a little. Not *real* crying. But the only type of crying that I can do at this stage. A sort of chest-heaving and gurgle.

Then Nancy looks over at me and asks me if I'm okay.

And I say to her: Yes, I'm fine. It's just nothing.

A Quiet House

She hadn't spoken to him in three months. When he arrived at her door, sweaty from carrying luggage down narrow Italian streets, she greeted him with a firm handshake and a flattened smile that looked frescoed onto her narrow face. It seemed clear that this was going to be a business transaction and that his presence was secondary to the paycheck. He was to live with her for his term abroad and the University would pay her for the inconvenience. Though her apartment was small, their interaction was still minimal. She taught math at a local elementary school and when he awoke each morning, she was already gone. There was always a plate of cookies on the counter and a fresh pot of tea on the stove for his breakfast and when he returned at the end of the day, she was watching TV by the fire twisting her rings around on her thin fingers as she stared at the set. In the beginning he tried to join her there, by the fire, hoping that the silence would be less uncomfortable when accompanied by the glow of the news. But he had too many questions about what the TV was telling him and he quickly grew tired from the concentration.

Dinner was the hardest. She rang a small brass bell to let him know it was time. He would get out of his desk chair and slump into his dining chair and eat for twenty minutes, trying to fill the empty space between them with pasta or artichokes. It was two weeks into his stay when they had their first real exchange. On a Wednesday night after a dinner of pork and carrots, she cleared their plates and returned from the kitchen with the customary basket of fruit for dessert. This time there were oranges. They each took one from the basket and picked up their knives. The skin of the orange was tough and he had trouble peeling it. Looking down, he picked away at the rinds when suddenly she leaned across the table and put her hand on his shoulder. He stopped and looked up, stunned. She took the knife from his hand and stared into his eyes, calling for his attention. He saw, for the first time, the pale blue of her iris and the depth of the pupils that looked back at him. The mass of hair that sat in a bun at the top of her head let lose a few gray strands as she looked back down at her orange. Making a fist around the handle with the blade facing into her chest, she pulled the knife across the top of the fruit, using her thumb to push out. Holding

it up, she angled it towards him so he could see what she had done. She had cut off the top. Did he understand? He did. Turning the orange around, she did the same to the bottom. She had already taken off her rings and they lay on the table cloth among the peels and dishes. Moving her thumb over to the dull side of the blade, she cut four breaks in the peel that wrapped around the middle. Again, she held it up and rotated it to show what she had done. He nodded. Then she put the knife down, pried off the four pieces and slowly began to eat. Her hands were wet from the citrus and the only sound in the room came from her mouth sucking on the fruit. He picked up the knife awkwardly and tried to both remember and mimic what she had done. He cut too deep at first, almost slicing it in half. Then, he didn't cut deep enough and only popped the stem off the bottom. Making the wedges on the side, he pushed straight through and ended up with a plate of skin and orange pulp. Sighing in resignation, he lost all posture in his shoulders and let his elbows sag off the table. She quietly rolled him an apple from the basket and without looking up from the table space between them, she smiled softly.

A few days later, she offered him a cigarette. It made him wish that he smoked. He declined by opening his hand and facing his palm towards the box and then slowly pushing downward. 'No' was the same in both languages, he was sure, but it made more sense to respond to the silence with silence. And hand gestures had gotten him this far, anyway.

One week after that, as he was leaving to go out after dinner, she motioned him to come over to her side of the table. She looked at him along the bridge of her nose, her face turned down not in a frown but in inspection of his appearance. Taking his tie in her hands, she inspected the knot and shook her head. He picked up the tie from the bottom and then shrugged his shoulders, making a confused face that he had grown accustomed to putting on. She motioned to a chair and he sat down with his back to her. Standing above him and leaning over his shoulder, she undid the tie and slowly re-tied it. Her breath was old and shallow on the back of his neck and it gave him the same shivers as when his barber pushed his ear forward to cut the hard to reach hairs. When she had finished, he looked down at the beautiful knot, which now seemed like a natural extension of his collar. 'Grazie,' he wanted to say to her, but he did not want to ruin the moment. He stood up and turned around to give her a smile of gratitude and he saw that she had

been crying. He made another confused look, though this time it came naturally and his eyebrows had also lifted up in the middle to show concern. She pointed to a yellow photo on the wall behind him of a young man and a young woman. The woman had a bun on her head and rings on her fingers. The young man had a tie knotted just like the one she had tied. Turning away from the wall, he faced her and leaning in hesitantly, gave her a hug. She did not hug him back, but instead put her head on his shoulder before turning around and continuing to clear the table. He walked out of the kitchen and left the house for the evening.

The following weeks carried on with more ease. They exchanged glances at the dinner table and smiled at appropriate times when passing in the short hall between his bedroom and the bathroom. Lately, when he had finished his school work, he sat with her in the living room while she watched TV. He still did not understand what the men with the suits and nice hair were saying, but he gauged his reaction off of hers.

Once, during a dinner where he could not recognize what he was being served, he looked up from poking at the food with his fork to see her sitting in front of him, thumbs tucked into her armpits, flapping her elbows up and down and bobbing her head. Chicken. They both laughed softly. Small moments like these made any lingering discomfort fall away and get rolled up into the table cloth that she washed each day and hung up to dry in the April heat.

Inside the house, wrapped in a cocoon of their mutual silence, he was comfortable. The door to his bedroom was now always open and his window curtain was always pulled to the side, letting the Florence sun spill into the room and all over the tile floor. At night, he fell asleep to the sounds of the passing cars and when traffic was low, the window sill creaked and whispered to him in Italian until he was at rest.

It was three months into his stay, when he was doing homework in his room like he usually did, with the sun coming in through the window and bathing his work in a golden light, that he heard what sounded like a pillowcase full of potatoes fall down the stairs. He quickly got up and went to the hall. Strange noises did not happen in this house. There was no sound that he, at this point, could not attribute to the leaky faucet in the kitchen or the broken window latch that tapped against the metal frame on windy days. Then he heard a muffled

voice cry out from the back of the house. He ran towards the sound. At the end of the hall was an open door he had never seen open before. Through it was a small staircase that led to an underground storage room. A metal pull chain for a bare light bulb swung in the air above his head as he came through the doorway. The walls were cement and there were no hand rails. He looked down and saw her lit only by the single bulb above him, lying at the base of the stairs. Racing down the steps he came to her side. Slowly, he put his hands around her shoulders and propped her up against the wall. She was bleeding from her left elbow and her hands were scraped from the fall. He did not know what to do and he was afraid to move her more. Then he offered her his arm and she took it. He felt the cold metal of her rings on his skin. With one arm linked in hers and the other hovering in the air around her they gradually stood up and climbed the stairs. Once they reached the top, he turned off the light and shut the door. Turning back around, he walked her to the kitchen. He sat there while she cleaned her hands and washed out her cuts and bandaged them. He wanted to help but she wanted to do it herself. After she was cleaned up, he walked her to the living room and the two sat on the couch. She turned to him.

"Grazie," she said. He had heard that word used countless times before during his stay in Italy. He had even used it himself. But this was different. She spoke in a way that made him feel as though this were the first time human speech had ever been used correctly. And it was being used for him. It hung in between them for a moment and sat in the air, heavy with meaning. Then, she turned on the TV and the two of them were suddenly covered again with the clattering noise of the rest of the world.

I Walked Home

I walked home the long way today.
I walked by a church and watched the sun change colors as it danced
across the stained-
Actually, it wasn't a church, it was a synagogue.
But saying synagogue in the beginning of a poem like that can be
jarring.
It would break the flow.
And I feel like it embeds a secret Jewish agenda.
Or maybe I should say Jewish message,
In case agenda has too many negative connotations.
And that wasn't what I was trying to do at all.
The church is familiar enough that it can be brushed over,
Imagined and forgotten, like a barn or hospital.
A synagogue is confusing, and it just sounds so
Jewish.
The windows were quite pretty though.
Once I noticed them, I walked much slower,
Watching each glass panel shine with life
And then fall flat as I walked past.

Tell Him. A Manual

Tell him you aren't going to put up with this anymore. Tell him today you are putting your foot down. Complain about the trash that hasn't been taken out. Tell him to put the damn cap on the toothpaste tube. Whine at him for not putting the coaster under his favorite Starbuck's coffee mug. Tell him to stop smacking his lips on the Cool Ranch Doritos. Yell at him for eating Doritos. Roll your eyes when he tells you they are reduced fat. Almost trip over his dirty socks. Tell him you are tired of picking up after him. Tell him you have two kids to babysit and you don't need another. Hear him start coughing. Listen to him call your name. Tell him his chip probably went down the wrong pipe. Listen to him scream your name. Pat his back. Watch him press his palm against the breast pocket with the black ball tip pen. Hear him tell you to call 911. Watch the children run into the room. Hear them ask you what daddy is doing. Watch their little eyes bulge like the blue veins on his neck.

Dial 911. Tell the emergency operator your street address. Say that you need an ambulance. Tell him to hurry. Hear the man ask you what the emergency is. Tell the operator that he collapsed. Hear the operator tell you to calm down. Tell him that your husband was just talking to you and now he is on the floor. Scream your husband's name. Shake his limp body. Rub your fist against his chest. Inform the operator that you don't know if he is breathing. Inform the operator that you can't breathe. Tell the children to go upstairs. Tell them daddy just fell down. Tell them daddy is taking a nap.

Ride in the front of the ambulance. Feel the sirens pierce your eardrums. Remind yourself to breathe. Feel yourself trembling. Feel your heart racing. Feel hot. Feel cold. Feel nauseous. You are seeing spots. You are in shock. Hear the driver tell you that you are in shock. The children! Remember the children. Tell the driver that the children are home alone. Hear the driver tell you that they are with the neighbor. Hear the driver tell you to try and breathe. Hear the paramedic say that your husband has regained consciousness. Thank God. Try to inhale. Thank God. Try to exhale. Thank God again. Forget to inhale. Hear the driver reminding you to breathe. Inhale. Thank God.

In the emergency room, stay calm. Tell yourself that he has

always had a fair complexion. Tell the doctor that he is just working too hard. Tell yourself that it is heart burn. Tell yourself that he is alright. Don't watch the nurse take the tests. Pretend that you are not scared. Don't watch the doctor leave the room. Take his hand when he reaches for you. Look him in the eye. Tell him you love him. Hear the doctor's diagnosis. Feel your heart skip.

In the emergency room, panic. Notice how pale he is. Tell the doctor that he has been tiring easily. Listen to your husband tell the doctor about his chest pain. You know that something is not right. Watch the nurse take the tests. You are scared. Watch the doctor leave the room. Reach for your husband's hand. Look at the floor. Tell him you love him. Comprehend the doctor's diagnosis. Feel your heart stop.

Tell the kids that Daddy has to visit the doctor. When Kara asks if Daddy has a boo-boo, tell her yes. When Mathew asks if Daddy will be ok, tell him yes. Call the babysitter. Skip your important meeting. Stand up Corporate America's most elite to visit him. Wonder if you will be fired. Sanitize your hands twice, hospitals have germs. Be optimistic. Pray all the time that he will get better. Hold his hand. Tell him everything is going to be ok. Watch the doctors listen to his lungs. Watch him being brave. Thank the doctors for doing everything they can.

Tell the kids that Daddy is at a sleep-over at the hospital. When Kara tells you to kiss Daddy's boo-boo for her, tell her that you will. When Mathew asks if Daddy will be ok, lie. Call the daycare center. Your meeting is not important. Spit in Corporate America's face. Don't care that you might get fired. Don't sanitize your hands. You aren't concerned about germs. You don't care if you get MRSA. Be pessimistic. Don't pray. God can't love you if he is letting this happen. Don't hold his hand. The chill of his skin will frighten you. Don't tell him everything is going to be ok. It won't be. Don't watch his eyes roll back into his head. Don't watch the doctors while they do chest compressions. The doctors don't deserve your thanks.

Don't let them see your emotion. Be strong. Crying is a sign of weakness. You are not weak. Expel all forms of sadness and fear in the form of exercise. Blink back the tears. You wouldn't want your mascara to run. Sprint until your heart thrashes against your chest with such undeniable force that you are sure it will rip through your black, Adidas sweatshirt. Catch your breath. Hold your hand over the pledge of allegiance spot. If it breaks through the skin, you can catch it. Pretend

everything is normal. Tell Mathew to eat his broccoli. Go about your business like it is any other day. When they ask, tell them you are fine. Tell yourself that you are ok.

Let them see your emotions. You don't have to be strong. Cry like the little girl that you really are. Test the strength of your tear ducts. Let the black mascara stain your skin like ink. Lay low. Don't exert yourself too much. You need rest. The emotional exercise is burning more calories than two hours on the Stairmaster would anyway. Keep crying. Don't worry that you can't catch your breath. Hyperventilate. Breathe the hurt into a brown, paper lunch bag. Roll your eyes at the stack of unused lunch bags above the juice boxes in the pantry. Remember when he said he would start packing turkey on rye. Remember when he promised to swear off the Double Cheese Whoppers. Hold your hand over the pledge of allegiance spot. Everything is not normal. Tell Mathew he doesn't have to eat his broccoli. It is not any other day. You are not fine. Tell yourself that you are not ok.

Tell yourself this is not happening. Tell yourself this is a horrible nightmare. Pinch yourself. Try and wake up. Pinch yourself harder. Disregard the machine that is breathing for him. Tell yourself he is going to pull through. Envision the future. Making bets on who will go grey first. The white kerchief in his breast pocket as he walks your daughter down the aisle. Buy the sexy strapless dress with the empire waist to wear for him once he is well. Start planning a welcome home party. Put an order in for his favorite appetizer, pigs in a blanket. Think of the advances in science. Buy him a lifetime subscription to ESPN The Magazine, he has always wanted that. Tell him that you love him.

Tell yourself this is happening. Tell yourself to face reality. You are not sleeping. Pinch yourself. You are awake. Don't pinch yourself harder. It will hurt. Hear the whoosh of oxygen being forced into him. He is not going to pull through. Think of the past. The chills he gave you that July when he got down on his knee, not to tie his shoe. Watching him teach your son how to throw a spiral. Donate the dress to the Salvation Army. Cancel the caterer. Forget about the pigs in a blanket. Study the yellow pages. You need more doctors. More second opinions. Stack the magazines in the garage. Tell him that you love him.

Forget to put grape jelly and peanut butter on the kids' peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Notice the lawn is growing out of control. Imagine him riding around on his John Deere. Pay the boy at the end of

the street twenty bucks to take care of it. Ignore the messages about the overdue water bill. Hope that the water won't be turned off. Forget to sign Mathew's permission slip for the zoo. Notice Kara's mismatched outfit she is wearing for the fourth day in a row. Throw out the sour milk. Make a note to take out the garbage.

Hate him for being sick. Hate him for knowing that he is going to leave you. Hate him for abandoning you. Hate his heart for failing. Hate his ventricles for not pumping the blood. Hate that he is dying. Hate that you are not. Give up hope. Lose faith in everything, everyone. Tell God to go to hell. Throw out your rosary beads. Hate the sunlight. Hate the birds that always have something to sing about. Hate the plants for growing, for being green and full of life. Hate the traffic you sit in on the way to the hospital. Hate the music on the radio. Hate the radio station for playing bad music. Hate the radio host for his annoying voice. Curse him out. Scream. Flip off the taxi driver next to your minivan.

Hate the enthusiastic nurse that is always smiling. Tell her to stop smiling. Scream louder. Hate the doctors. Hate the doctors in their pressed, white coats. Hate the medical students that trail them like a pack of hungry puppies waiting for a turn to suck the nipple. Hate the surgeons and their blue scrubs. Hate the surgeons for not fixing him. Hate the social worker that brought you a box of tissues when they told you. Hate tissues. Hate paper products with their one ply, two ply, with and without lotion options. Hate options. Hate making decisions. Hate the color of the tissue box. Hate the font of the letters that spell Kleenex. Hate colors.

Hate that you have to see him in pain. Hate that you aren't blind. Hate that you hear him struggling for every breath. Hate that you aren't deaf. Hate hospitals. Hate the sterile, sick people smell of hospitals. Hate the piercing white walls of hospitals. Hate that you feel numb. Hate that you feel broken. Hate the people that try to console you. Hate the lasagna casserole your coworker left on your doorstep. Hate the word, casserole. Hate food. Wake the neighbors with your screaming. Hate the wedding ring that mocks your strength. Hate the sparkle of the square cut diamond that he was so proud to put on your finger. Hate that it is in sickness and not in health. Hate that you hate everything. Hate yourself for not being able to help him. Hate that you can't take his place. Hate that you want to kiss him. Hate that you want to tell him how much you care about him. Tell him how much you care

about him. Hate that he can't hear you. Hate that you have to say goodbye. Hate that he can't tell you goodbye. Hate that there is a goodbye. Hate that you are so in love with him.

Encourage him to get better. Try to keep his spirits up. Tell him you know how hard he trying to get well. Kiss his forehead. Tell him the children are proud of him. Show him the rainbow on the get well card that the kids made at pre-school. Don't pester him. Keep your composure. Begging is beneath you. Gently hold his hand in yours. Tell him you are here. Tell him you love him.

Tell him that he has to get better. Tell him he can't leave you. Tell him to try harder, damn it. Kiss his forehead. Tell him that the children need him. Point to the clouds on the get well card that the kids made in pre-school. Tell him that he can have poker night with the boys twice a week. Tell him that he and his buddies can smoke their Montecristo's inside. Tell him that you will buy him his rocky road ice cream with all the fat instead of the vegan tofutti alternative. Tell him he won't ever have to empty the dishwasher again. Tell him you will get him season tickets to the Sixers. Ask him what he wants. Tell him you won't complain when he putts golf balls into his #1 Dad coffee mug in the middle of the living room. Tell him he can have it, whatever he wants. Tell him you will give it to him. Tell him if you don't have it, you will buy it. If you can't buy it, you will steal it. Tell him that you won't make him sit through another viewing of *Twilight*. Lose your composure. Begging is not beneath you. Get down on your knees. Clench his hand in yours. Tell him you will stay by his side. Tell him that he must stay by your side. Tell him you can't live without him. Raise your voice. Tell him that you can't breathe without him. Squeeze him tighter. Shout. Tell him you can't do it alone. Tell him you won't do it alone. Tell him that you will die without him.

Use up all your tears. Cry without them. Feel alone. Call Raymond from Raymond and Son's Funeral Home. Feel the raw emptiness gnawing at your insides. Buy the modest black dress in the window at Ann Taylor Loft. Feel the ache of your muscles like you have been run over by a car. Take six Advils that won't help. Feel numb. Call your mom. Ask her to take the kids for a few weeks. Take the flowers that have grown their own garden in your kitchen. Feed them one by one to the garbage disposal. Take care not to get your finger caught in the disposal. But if you do, you have nine others. Put an online order in at the florist for arrangements of lilies and sunflowers. Remember the

yellow lilies he brought you on your first date. Remember when he told you that roses just weren't creative enough. Don't wash your hair for a week. You don't care that the knots are so big that it looks like you have dreads. He won't be running his fingers through it anyway.

Gain ten pounds. Stop eating. Did you know you can go two weeks without eating before you will die? Maybe you should try to go two weeks. Lose fifteen pounds. Hope that you will get struck by lightning. Get really drunk off the Sangiovese bottle he bought you when he took you to Tuscany for your birthday. Smile about how he always went overboard with your birthday presents because he would forget the anniversary two weeks before. Stop cleaning the house. Let the laundry pile up like your pain. Stop getting the mail. Ignore the door, phone, bills, email, boss, friends, and family. You have no one. Nothing. Cover the windows with towels. Darkness is better than light. Ask God what you did to deserve this. Sleep on the cold Home Depot tiles that he put in himself last year. Notice the toothpaste cap behind the toilet. Remember how he always lost the cap from a new tube of Crest. Ask God what he did to deserve this. Lock yourself in the bathroom. Tell yourself you can't go on like this.

Cry if you want to. You are still allowed. You are not alone. Feel the pulse on your wrist. You were not actually run over by a car. The ache of your muscles will lessen. Don't overdose on Advil. Put the flowers in vases. Smell the flowers. There is still beauty. Keep all ten fingers. Put the stopper in the garbage disposal. Practice good hygiene. Buy a tube of toothpaste. Throw out the cap. Eat food. Stop hoping that you will get struck by lightning. Drink water. Stay hydrated. Pay a maid to clean the house and do the laundry. Ask the neighbor to collect your mail. You have family, friends, a door, a phone, bills, email, a boss. Notice that they care about you. Surround yourself with family and friends. Take the towels off the windows. Open the screen to let the fresh air remind you that you are here. There is light. Get up from the floor. Stop sleeping on the cold tiles. Tell yourself that you can go on. Tell yourself that you will go on, for him. Go to confession. Say an Act of Contrition. Tell God to watch over him. Tell God to watch over you. Tell God to tell him that you miss him.

Tell yourself that with time, it will get easier. Tell yourself that maybe you will think about something else for a moment. Fake smile. Pretend to be happy. Pretend your insides aren't fighting to explode. Tell yourself that your son's eyes will stop reminding you of his father.

Tell yourself that soon you will stop sleeping in his fleece zip-up with the Cadillac logo. Tell yourself that tomorrow you won't wear his Polo cologne. Try to tell yourself something to make you feel better. Try to feel better. Try to remember how it felt not to hurt. Go to an all you can eat Chinese buffet. Eat nine eggrolls. Eat as much as you can keep down. Try to feel full again. Try anything to not feel so empty.

Make a list of who to make aware of his funeral. Remember when you sat down together to write the invite list for your wedding. He didn't want his estranged Uncle Arthur to come. Wonder if you should inform crazy Uncle Arthur about the funeral. Choose between the 300 year and 500 year water resistance guarantee for his casket. Select the varnished Mahogany or natural Pine finish. Choose the white velvet lining, extra plush. Wonder if he wants his middle initial on the headstone. Decide if you want to put your name on his stone with the date of death left blank. Ask your mom if that is still a practiced Catholic tradition. Consider how you will tell the children that Daddy is at another sleepover and this time he isn't coming home. Ask God to give you strength. Cry because your children are without a father. Cry because they are so young. Cry because you are without your husband. Cry because you can't bring him back.

Visit the cemetery. Try not to think about all the bodies in the ground beneath you. Peel a sticky helicopter from your black heel. Look up at the Sugar Maple from which it fell. Question if the stone is too big or too small. Wonder if you should have went with Marble instead of Granite. See the letters etched into the stone. Cry because the letters spell his name. See the permanence of the engraving. You didn't put your name next to his on the stone. Regret your decision. Feel guilty. Cry harder. Sit down. Press your spine against the bark of the Sugar Maple. Tell him you are sorry.

An Introduction to The Lifestyle

Wayne, late 30s, native New Yorker
Lily, late 30s, also a native New Yorker
Eli, early 20s, Fresh-eyed, innocent
Abigail, early 20s, seemingly dowdy
Waiter, late 20s

(New York City. Wayne & Lily walk into a bar/restaurant and are seated at a table by a Waiter. He leaves. They sit right next to each other, leaving the other two seats open. They seem to be waiting for something.)

LILY

You're sure you told them—

WAYNE *(a little angry)*

Yes, Lil, I told them Bill's Bar & Burger.

LILY

You told them Bill's not Phil's?

WAYNE

Yes. I even emailed them the address.

LILY

Then why aren't they here?

WAYNE

We only just got here Lil—

LILY

But we're late.

WAYNE

It is not my fault we're late. You took a half hour to pick out your underwear.

LILY

These are my lucky black lace—

WAYNE

Not that I didn't enjoy the show...

LILY

Last time I wore these we met up with the Howards.

WAYNE

The Howards!

LILY

Told you they're lucky.

WAYNE

I miss them. They *had* to stop playing.

LILY

Just because Le Trapeze got a *little* out of hand.

WAYNE

Assholes and their cameras...

LILY

I was wearing the red teddy that night. Bad luck.

WAYNE

Glad you didn't wear that tonight.

LILY

Exactly. Who knows how the night's going to end. (*As she says this a waiter arrives*)

WAITER

Can I get you anything to start off with, our specials are—

WAYNE (*cuts him off*)

Not yet, we're waiting for another couple.

LILY (*to Wayne*)

What did they say they'd be wearing?

WAYNE

I think it was blue... (*to waiter*) Say is there another couple sitting alone, and the lady's wearing a blue dress?

WAITER

I'm not quite sure sir, but if I see them I'll tell them to join you?

WAYNE

That sounds very good. (*Waiter leaves*)

LILY

So their names again?

WAYNE

Abigail, and Eli—They're newcomers so...

LILY

You want me to take it easy on them. Okay I get it.

WAYNE

Just don't overwhelm them.

LILY

I told you the Marshall's were a mistake from the beginning.

WAYNE

Well I told you they were new, and the first thing you say is "wanna full swap?" that is not how you get things done.

LILY

How was I supposed to know they were only into watching. You saw

that picture they put online. Talk about mixed signals.

WAYNE

Not everybody walks the walk babe.

LILY

Not everyone likes to play apparently. *(The other couple arrives, Wayne and Lily stand to greet them)*

WAYNE *(shaking hands)*

You must be Eli.

ELI

Wayne?

LILY *(shaking hands)*

And Abigail?

ABBY

Abby. Lily? Pleased to meet you. *(Couples finish shaking hands and sit down, Abby and Eli opposite Lily and Wayne)*

ELI

Sorry we're so late. We got a little lost.

LILY *(to Wayne)*

I thought you gave them the address?

ELI

Oh no, he did. We're just new to the whole Metro thing.

WAYNE

Ah. How long you been here?

ELI

What hun, a month?

ABBY

Yep, just about that. How long have you guys lived here?

LILY

Oh God, forever. (*Abby flinches a little at the use of 'God'*) I was born here, and Wayne's from Queens.

WAYNE

Where you two from?

ELI

Salt Lake City, Utah.

WAYNE

Hmm that's a far way.

ELI

Well I got a job here, so we just decided to move.

LILY

And you Abby? You get a job here?

ABBY

Not yet. I'm looking.

WAYNE

I hear ya. I can't tell you how many folks are still searchin for a job out here.

LILY (*whispering*)

Wayne...

WAYNE

Lil, I told you. Patience. Conversation. Sorry, my girlfriend doesn't seem to understand the art of conversation.

ELI

You two aren't married?

WAYNE

Oh God no. We like to keep our relationship open.

LILY

You know how it is.

ELI (*not understanding*)

Oh...

LILY

You two married?

ELI

Not yet. Engaged.

ABBY

Our parents are traditional.

LILY

But they let you move out here with him?

ABBY

It's not like we live together.

WAYNE

You two don't live together! Jeez, I haven't seen that in— (*waiter arrives*)

WAITER

Can I start you off with anything to drink?

LILY

Martini, extra dry. That must spice things up...

WAYNE

Scotch on the rocks.

ABBY

Ginger ale please.

ELI

I'll just have water please. (*Waiter leaves*)

WAYNE

Just water?

ELI

I don't drink.

LILY

God, you are new.

ELI

So in the Ad...

LILY (*excited they finally brought it up*)

You guys are into the Lifestyle too?

ELI

I'm so glad we found your ad. We've been looking for another couple for a while.

LILY

See Wayne—told you they were lucky.

ELI

We keep finding other women, but no duo—

LILY

There are sooo many singles out there. Sorry not into the ménage à trois

ELI

I don't speak French...

LILY

It means threesome.

ELI

(gasps)

ABBY

(gasps)

LILY

I know. Who's into that these days? So 2000.

WAYNE

(Puts arm around Lily) We're traditionalists.

ELI

And so are we.

WAYNE

We prefer the old fashioned swap.

ELI

Excuse me?

WAYNE

You and Lily, me and Abby.

ELI

What?

LILY

We don't have to do full swap. We can do soft swap if you want

ELI (*offended*)

I do not want to swap my wife.

WAYNE

I thought you were into the lifestyle... (*Waiter arrives with their drinks. Abby takes a sip of hers and gets a disgusted look on her face*)

ABBY

Excuse me, this isn't ginger ale.

WAITER

Ah yes, it is our Seasonal Ginger flavored Ale. You ordered it, no?

ABBY

No, I don't drink. (*Waiter takes drink away from her*)

WAITER

My apologies. Just drinks, or dinner too?

WAYNE

Just drinks, thanks (*Waiter leaves*).

ELI (*quite angry*)

Abby let's go.

ABBY (*still cleaning mouth*)

Devil's water.

WAYNE

You're the ones who answered *our* ad.

ELI

(*Unfolds crinkled piece of paper from his pocket*) Yes and it says here "male female couple seeks same to share in the lifestyle. Newcomers welcome." *Nothing* about trading wives.

LILY (*laughing*)

You really must be new.

WAYNE

I think what she's trying to say is it's all in the Lifestyle

ELI

The Mormon lifestyle does not...

WAYNE

Woah, Mormon lifestyle?

ELI

Yes. We're Mormons.

LILY (*still laughing*)

Lifestyle means swinging...

ELI

Swinging?

ABBY (*simultaneously*)

Swinging?

WAYNE

Aren't you Mormons into that?

ELI (*stands to leave*)

Abby, we're leaving.

WAYNE

You can only play with *your* wives? Greedy. (*Abby and Eli storm out in a huff*)

LILY

It *was* on Craigslist.

WAYNE

Want to go to Le Trapeze?

LILY

Fine. But let me finish my drink.

END SCENE

Perhe

I have never run stark naked
in feet
of Maine Snow
just to cool off.

I have never sat in the sauna
for hours;
thoughts sweating out
coerced by the vasta's drumbeat.

I have never used a porcelain chamberpot
hidden under my bed
because it was too cold & dark
to walk to the outhouse.

I have never gone to school
by way of reindeer,
or lived until I was 99
smoking a pipe through the years.

Emma.Sylvester.Reino.
Heikenin. Martikainen.

&I have never had to live
without my parents,
with grandparents
as standins.

I have never had to communicate
with my hands
so my parents could
understand.

Alice.Will/Ed.Shirley
McCabe.Kimball/Pratt

& I have never had everything
a baseball team
a trucking company
end up a sacrifice.

I have never frequented flea markets
selling memories
from other people's
dead houses.
I have never had to change
my name from its original
because customs taught me to fear
prejudice.

I have never escaped
my father
and his fascist friends
fleeing to America.

Watzke-Watcke. Joe.

& I have never had a stepfather
who beat me until that village
woman gave me her name
for life in America.

I was never born
on a farm
to a mother of two dead children
one too close to the fire, one too far away.

Figlar. Mary

But all the blood that got you through
is in me
& pumps through my heart
& I know you are there.

Greta.

Silence

I always wanted to sit in a hole. It would have to be a round one, not like a grave or anything. Probably it'd be real big too, so I could focus on the actual hole instead being uncomfortable or anything like that. That's the kind of weird stuff I always think about, the kind of stuff I never tell people about. Stuff like that is probably the reason I did what I had to do. Maybe I didn't really *have* to do it, but the past is the past. It sure seemed like I had to. At least that I should. Everyone thinks the reason I did it is because of what happened to Daniel, but people are stupid. I never really liked people in general, especially the ones I don't know. That's not really on topic though.

Maybe it started with Daniel. Everyone expected me to be real upset after what happened, and I guess I was. Most of the time I was just upset that I wasn't sad he died. To be completely honest, he wasn't the smartest kid in the world, and I sort of grew up expecting him to die. He did love to have a good time, apparently too much though. He OD'd on jack back in March. I think it's the first time he tried it. I'm sure of it actually. That's not really on topic either though. So he was dead and everyone thought I should be getting real depressed, seeing how he was only a few months older than me and we did a lot of stuff together.

Our whole town was changed the week he died. From my perspective at least. I kept wanting it to rain, to be overcast, to be shitty out. It never was though. The weather refused to care that Daniel died. That's how the suburbs are I guess. They don't care much about individuals.

Don't get me wrong, I wasn't sitting stone faced at his funeral. I cried a lot, especially when I had to be his pall bearer, but I didn't really know why I was crying. It should've rained that day, but it didn't. It was probably the nicest day of the year actually. It was still the beginning of spring. Flowers were blooming, birds and squirrels were hanging off all the trees. Everyone was dressed in black, and they looked miserable. It was probably seventy degrees that day, but it felt like one ten under my suit. I could see everyone's pit stains a mile away. I wasn't sure if it was the suits and the black dresses or the eighteen year old being put in the ground that was making them so upset.

My mom asked me every day that week if I was doing okay, or if I needed to stay home from school that day. Most people would leap at the chance to miss school, but I went. There was barely a cloud in the sky that whole week.

A kid OD'ing isn't much of big news around where I live. People picture the suburbs as white fences and a bunch of stuck up rich kids. That's pretty accurate, but there's a lot more drugs than most people think. Half the parents are alcoholics, so it makes sense that the kids are drugged out. Plus it was March when it happened, so everyone was getting ready for lacrosse season. Don't get me wrong, people acted as sorry as they could, especially to my aunt, but no one was jumping off bridges or anything. Most people in the suburbs are fake like that. They couldn't give two shits about anyone outside their own family, and probably most of the people inside it too.

The real shit started about a week after his funeral. My parents were telling me I wasn't talking much, and I tried to remind them that I never did. Too stubborn, or maybe truly concerned, my mom made me go see a shrink.

Dr. Daniel DiBianco. The first thing he ever said to me was to call him Daniel. My mom's face sank when she heard that. Too bad she paid in advance. He had a ground floor office in a thirteen story building right next to NIH. I could tell from his office he really loved being a shrink. Everything was stereotypical. Books everywhere, most of them probably never opened. Pictures of his children and some shitty modern art all over the walls. He had his chair caddy-cornered with a sofa which he told me I could lay on. I pulled a stool from across the room so I could sit staring him right in the eyes. That freaked him out. He tried to act like it didn't, but it did.

Pretty much I just tried to fuck with him like that. He just kept asking me how I felt inside. After three visits he told my mom I was bipolar. I told her he was full of shit.

The next doctor I went to was a woman, Dr. Colishaw. Her I liked, so I stopped lying and tried to convince her, like everyone else, that nothing was wrong with me.

Her office wasn't what you would envision a shrink's office like. I think it was a converted apartment. Huge French doors led to her office, which at one point I assume was a sun room or something like that. No bookshelves lined the walls. She didn't even put her diploma on the wall. I liked her office. It wasn't huge, but it wasn't cramped.

She had three chairs arranged in a triangle. She told me to sit wherever I wanted, so I took the biggest one, facing the four huge windows which made the sun hit me right in the eyes. For an hour three times a week I sat there, squinting, trying to convince someone to believe me. No matter what the weather was all day, as soon as I got in that office, the sun came out just to fuck with me. The room had music posters all over, and not old shit like the Beatles but bands I actually listened to. She had this one big Tupac poster that always confused me. Maybe she was trying to recapture her youth. Maybe she actually liked Tupac. What I really thought was she just wanted to make me, and every other young person she listened to, feel more comfortable. It didn't.

She said I was bipolar. That really pissed me off, considering how hard I tried to convince her I wasn't. I told her I had never talked much, how I was much happier reading by myself or listening to music than talking to people. But that was her diagnosis, just like DiBianco. It was a Friday when I finally asked about it.

"There is nothing wrong with being bipolar."

I'll never forget hearing that from her. It pretty much cemented her as being a quack in my mind. She was pretty though, and had a great rack, so I never complained about her to my mom.

My mom was convinced I was bipolar. She started treating me like I was retarded or had cancer or something. She was offering to do everything for me, and telling me I didn't have to do any of the stuff I used to have to. She cleaned my room, asked me what I wanted for dinner every night, like she thought I was going to drop dead any minute.

"Are you feeling okay today John?" "How was school?" "If you ever need to talk you know I'm here for you hon'."

Where the fuck was all that for the last seventeen years? All I wanted at this point was for her to get pissed at me, real mad where she just stormed off and told my dad what I did. I wanted to fight my dad again. That's what I really wanted. He sat in his office all day, and no one said shit to him while I'm going to some crazy shrink bitch who thinks a Tupac poster is going to make me talk to her. Fuck Tupac.

It was half way through April when they started putting me on meds. Xanax, Zoloft, Prozac, they tried everything. It didn't really mean much to me since I just threw them all down the drain. I knew I wasn't crazy and I didn't need some pill to make me think straight. It was probably just a placebo anyway. Doctors are crazy that way, not

me. I'm not crazy. People trying to tell me I was is what really pissed me off. I started to believe that shit, like maybe something should be wrong with me.

I spent the last week of March trying to become an alcoholic. It was easy to get hard liquor, and even easier to drink it by myself at home, since everyone else was depressed all the time. Well not my mom, but she was working all the time. She was convinced my dad was going to get fired, since he kept skipping work. My dad is the one who got hit the hardest I guess. Having his nephew die like that, that's fucked up. I wasn't sure if he was drinking again or not, but I knew at one point in his life that's what he would've done, so I figured I should try it. Drinking before you go to school and as soon as it over sounds like it means you're fucked in the head, but I wasn't. I mean everyone thought I was, but I wasn't. I gave up on it though, because it sounded like something Daniel would do. I never wanted to be like Daniel. He was a real asshole most of the time.

After my failed week of alcoholism, I was out of ideas. If I ever was depressed, it was the two weeks after that. My whole life was about trying to convince everyone I was fine. My mom wasn't buying it though. Especially when I told her that I fucking hated Daniel all along. That's when she really went nuts. She started screaming, which I was actually pretty happy about. She didn't tell my dad about it though. I never hated Daniel. If my dad heard I said that he probably would've disowned me. Or he would've done nothing. He was doing a lot of nothing lately. Just sitting in his office, lights off, a slight glow coming from the TV. I was always afraid of his office, ever since I could remember. The brown rug, brown desk, brown walls. No pictures on the wall, no frames on his desk. Just an old TV and a liquor cabinet. Well, just a cabinet I guess since it had been empty for two decades. I think.

When someone dies, you should be sad. You should act out, get depressed, fuck your life up or something like that. The problem was I didn't feel like doing any of that. All I wanted to do was go to back to thinking about shit like sitting in a hole. The only real effect Daniel had on me was that I couldn't think about that shit anymore because I was too worried about trying to get depressed or ruining my life or something. Maybe I was depressed. Most people assume I was, because of what I did. I really wasn't though. I was just sick of everyone thinking I was or I should be.

I had never seen my dad's gun, but I knew where it was. My dad is a pretty intimidating guy, your stereotypical big Irish asshole. He wasn't an asshole though. He's the only one who left me alone during all this shit, and everyone left him alone. Maybe I was jealous of him, since he could just go sit in his office, which was kind of like a big hole. Maybe not though. The first time I saw his gun I was really surprised. I thought it would be something badass, like a .44 magnum in those Dirty Harry movies he watched a lot. Too bad it was just a .22. That's a pussy gun. Seeing that shit made me almost not want to go through with it. I didn't want to be known as the kid who used a fucking .22. But by the time I got it out of his closet, my mind was made up.

My first thought was where to do it. The temple seemed like a good place, but maybe right through the forehead was better. I decided on the throat so that my mom could see my face one last time at my funeral.

Two years ago Daniel and I went into DC for a Wizards game. At least that's what we told everyone. He was so excited about having his license, and he told me we were just going to drive around so we could enjoy it. What we really did was drive around and get high. He was so happy to be driving that old Crown Vic' around. He thought it was the sickest car around. It was a piece of shit. It was older than both us. It had manual locks and windows for god's sake. But here was Daniel, beaming like the fourth of motherfucking July, blunt in hand, shaking his keys at me. This became a pretty normal routine for him, driving around the city to smoke a blunt. I went with him a few dozen times, but it always made me nervous, with all those cops driving around. I convinced him we had to park. He pulled into one of the parking lots at Rock Creek Park. Great, I thought, smoking weed on federal land, great idea Daniel.

Maybe it was because I was a lot more high than he was, but it was one of the few times I actually talked to Daniel. Not "hi" and "what's up," but actually talked. I told him all the crazy shit I thought about that I never told anyone. Not just that hole thing, but everything.

"You ever think about how easy it would be to die?"

He was just laughing at me. That's how he was, laughing at death, laughing at me, just laughing at everything.

"It's like that fucking sniper last year. We could die anytime, for no reason. No warning, nothing. Boom, bullet in your head. Boom, nuclear bomb. Boom, Mack fucking truck flips over onto you."

"Dude, don't be a pussy, John. Your real problem is you're too fucking scared all the time. And now you start talking all this physco babble bull shit.

"You're too fucking high right now dude, you need to start smoking more so you can handle your shit. I can't take you out if you're going to get all philosophical like this every time you smoke." All the windows were rolled up, and his straight black hair was sticking to his forehead like a flytrap. He was sweating, really sweating. It almost looked like he was in pain. His eyes were all fucked up. I knew mine where too, but I kept thinking at least I'm not sweating like that bitch in heat Daniel.

"I'm not that fucking high you dick, I'm trying to talk to you. We're cousins, we need to talk about shit deeper than just what girls we want to fuck and the shitty Wizards. Or maybe that's all you can think about you, fucking moron."

"Fuck off. Just because you get good grades doesn't mean you're smarter than me."

"Actually that's exactly what it means, asshole." Daniel really was a moron. He had the second lowest GPA in our high school. There was literally a kid with Down Syndrome who had better grades.

"I drive you around and let you smoke my weed, and you're calling me stupid. Fuck you John. Seriously. You're so fucking high and mighty all the time. All that shit you think about, that's not normal. Do you remember last week when you were talking about moving to a ranch in Canada somewhere? You're insane. You're a motherfucking nut job. Now shut the fuck up and finish the blunt. We're going home, you fucking prick." He turned the stereo up as loud as it went, leaving me drowning in my own thoughts and the lyrics of some terrible song he loved.

All I wanted to do at this point was stick him right in his mouth. He was the first person I'd ever opened up to like that. He was the first person that ever called me crazy. To my face anyway. And now he's the reason everyone does. He's probably glad, happy he was finally right about something. He was wrong though, I'm not crazy. Crazy is OD'ing on heroin the first time you ever take it. I know he felt so cool at that moment, thinking he could shoot all that shit up. Fuck him. I'm glad he fucking died.

The last time I ever saw Daniel was the Friday before he did it. He was all over me about going to Deep Creek that weekend. I knew I

wasn't the first person he invited so even though I wanted to go, I told him I couldn't. I made up every excuse I could, trying to make it obvious I just didn't want to spend a weekend with him. He might have taken the hint, but he might have been too stupid to get it. I'm not really glad he died. He could just be a dick sometimes. So could I though. Maybe I should have gone with him. I don't know if I would've let him do heroin around me. Definitely not right in front of me. I can't even look at needles. Even if I know it's clean I think every needle is going to give me HIV. Part of me wants to say I would have stopped him, but the other part keeps telling me that if that's true, I'm the reason he's dead. That's not possible. I was a good influence. I barely smoked pot, and always told him to cut back. I didn't drink half as much as him, and never let him drive drunk even if I had to pick him up at some ungodly hour. Half my life was spent babysitting that prick. There is no way it's my fault he's dead. It's my fault he lived as long as he did.

I started to feel bad about it right before I did it, but it was too late. Looking back, it was a pretty fucked up thing to do to my mom. Maybe she saw it coming, seeing as she thought I was bipolar anyway. Everyone did at that point. I guess it's my fault they did, seeing as I did all that crazy shit after he died. Most people knew I was drinking at school. Suburban people love to gossip, and I knew I had become the favorite topic after Daniel died. So did she though. I didn't want her to be. She just wanted to help me. I was fine though. In the end, I think she's the only one I feel bad for. Everyone probably talks about her now. Maybe she isn't even sad. Maybe she feels like she needs to be. Probably, she really is. I hope she understood.

It hurts a lot to bleed out from your throat. It wasn't as quick as I hoped. Louder, too. My mom came running in. All I remember after strangling that trigger is her face. Almost like she expected it. Maybe she was waiting for it.

I think it rained that day.

The doctors said the surgery was a success, but I think they're full of shit. All doctors are. They did manage to keep me alive. My voice box is probably gone forever though. It was worth it. I won't have to answer questions about Daniel anymore. Just about myself. I'll tell everyone I don't feel like typing it out right now, or that it's too hard of a memory to bring up. You're the only one I trust anyway.

Google This

When I was a kid I had to go to CCD. Once a week, Mr. Donahue would hand out the classroom Bibles. Every once and a while I would get one with a scribble on the inside cover. It read "Turn to page 27." Page 27 was still Genesis. I turned to page 27. On page 27 it would say "turn to page 389." I then turned to page 389. On page 389 it would say "turn to page 122." I then turned to page 122. On page 122 it would say "turn to page 213." I then turned to page 213. On page 213 there was a huge black cock drawn with very close attention to detail. The large black cock was drawn with thick black veins and thin curly hairs.

When you search "How tall is" on google the first suggested search is "How tall is Snooki." In fact, out of the first 6 suggested searches 5 are Jersey Shore cast members. The second suggested search is "How tall is Justin Bieber." When you change the search to "How tall are" the first suggested search is "How tall are the Kardashian sisters." The second is "How tall are the Olsen twins."

When you search "How heavy is" on google the first suggested search is "How heavy is implantation bleeding." I think this refers to birth control. It might refer to plastic surgery. When you change the search to "How heavy are" the first suggested search is "How heavy are the world's heaviest twins." The second suggested search is "How heavy are the world's heaviest breasts."

When you search "How wide is" on google the first suggested search is "How wide is a football field." The answer is 50 yards. The second suggested search is "How wide is a queen size bed." 7 of the top ten suggested searches refer to beds. The 9th suggested search is "How wide is a wide-set vagina."

When you search "How long is" on google the first suggested search is "How long is HIV/AIDS contagious." The second is "How long is the average male penis." The third is "How long is too long." When you edit the search to "How long does" the number one suggested search is "How long does sperm live." The second is "How long does it take to get pregnant." The third is "How long does the average male erection last." I'm glad they clarified that it was a male erection.

When you search "How big are" on google the first suggested

search is "How big are Megan Fox's breasts." The second suggested search is "How big are genital warts." The third is "How big are elephant bowel movements."

When you search "porn" with safe search on you get links to porn. When you search "porn" with safe search off you get links to horse porn. When you search "girls" with safe search on you get links to nude girls. When you search "girls" with safe search off you get links to nude girls eating feces. Safe search is a device created by google to protect kids from the internet. Safe search is somewhat ineffective.

When you search "rainbow" on google the first suggested search is "rainbow unicorn attack." The second suggested search is "rainbow parties." When you click this link you find out what a rainbow party is. It is a party where several girls wear different color lipstick. They then proceed to each perform oral sex on a different man. They eventually switch. The object is to get each male genitalia to be all the colors of the rainbow. I found this link with safe search on.

When you search "glue" on google the first suggested search is "glue in hair extensions." The second suggested search is "glue huffing." When you click this link it leads you to a site where there is a list of "Best Glues for Huffing" and "Cheapest Glues for Huffing." I found this link with safe search on.

When you search "Nyquil" on google the first suggested search is "Nyquil overdose." The second suggested search is "Nyquil drinking games." When you click this link it takes you to a website that lists several Nyquil drinking games. These include everything from "Pass the Bottle" to "Nyquil Pong." One link led me to a site that stated "YES! Contrary to popular belief you can hallucinate on Nyquil. It was the first drug I abused as a child." Yes! Contrary to popular belief I also found this link with safe search on.

When you search "Boobs" on google there are no suggested searches. In fact the links that pop up are somewhat tame. Most of the links bring you to websites that discuss breast cancer or women's rights.

When you search "Vagina" on google there are no suggested searches. In fact the links that pop up are mostly medical websites. Most of the websites are trying to sell you cream for vaginal odor. Some of the websites give references for good gynecologists.

When you search "Drugs" on google the first suggested search is "Drugstore." The second suggested search is "Drug rehab." The links are mostly made up of ads for toothbrushes and shaving cream. Some

of the links lead to websites for books about methods to "Kick the habit."

My freshman year of high school I made out with Rachel Starr and Rachel Roxxx. Making out was the furthest I ever went my freshman year of high school. My sophomore year of high school I felt up Dylan Rider and Kylee Strutt. Feeling a girl up was the furthest I ever went my sophomore year of high school. My junior year of high school I got head from Abby Rode and Alexis Texas. Getting head was the furthest I ever got my junior year of high school. My senior year of high school I had sex with Savannah Stern and Kacey Jordan. My senior year I finally lost my virginity. When I left home to go to college I expected to completely expand my sexual horizons. I expected anal sex, 69ing, and possibly even doggy style. In college I wrote a research paper for my English class with Abigail Adams, Elizabeth Blackwell, and Amelia Bloomer. In college writing was the furthest I ever got with a girl. Sex is far too chauvinistic for college.

With google images you can instantly see a picture of anything. When you search "Madonna" on google you will instantly see a plethora of pictures of her. You will see her before and after plastic surgery. You will see her chewing gum. You will even see a cartoon version of her pleasuring herself in a bathtub. People have the technology now to seamlessly put her face on the body of a real woman who is pleasuring herself in a bathtub. People do this through a program called Photoshop.

When you search "Jesus" on google you will instantly see pictures of Jesus hanging from the cross. You will see pictures of Jesus giving you the thumbs up. You will see pictures of Jesus giving you the finger. You will see pictures of Jesus upside down on the cross being set on fire. You will see Jesus in the shape of a cracker. You will see black Jesus. You will see white Jesus. If there is one sure thing it is that if you search Jesus on google images you will definitely see Jesus.

When you search "Oral Herpes" on google images you will never have oral sex again. In fact you may never kiss again. You definitely will never want to search "Oral Herpes" on google images again.

When you search "mouth cancer" on google images you will never chew tobacco again. You will never smoke a cigarette again. You might never kiss again. But, you will definitely never search "mouth cancer" on google images again.

When you search "Meat" on google images the first image will be of a steak. The second image will be of a lamb chop. The third image will be of a pork roast. The rest of the images will be of erect male penises. Some of the penises will be black. Some of the penises will be white. At least one of the images will be of an Asian woman surrounded by a plethora of huge erect male penises.

When you search "Male erect penises" on google images the first image will be of a white penis that is wider than it is long. This will be labeled as a "chode." The next three images will be of 'Puff Daddy' or 'P. Diddy' or 'Sean Diddy Combs' or whatever he is calling himself today. Anyway most of the pictures will be of scientific charts or maps of the human body. However, at least one of the pictures will be of an Asian woman surrounded by a plethora of huge erect male penises.

When you search for "forks" on google images most of the images will be of forks. If you search for "spoons" on google images most of the images will be of spoons. However, if you search "knives" on google images most of the images will be of serial killers. However, if you search "chainsaw" on google images most of the images will be of chainsaws. However, at least one of the images will be of Christian Bale playing Patrick Bateman. In this image he will be butt naked, covered in blood, and carrying a chainsaw.

When you search "Patrick Bateman" on google images at least one of the images will be from a real Patrick Bateman's Facebook page. Facebook is a social networking site that was developed in 2004. The rest of the images will be of Christian Bale playing Patrick Bateman. In most of these pictures he will be naked and covered in blood. In some of these pictures he will be flexing while having sex with two women.

When I turned 21 my friends took me to a bar called The Lucky Lady and promised me the time of my life. They first introduced me to a Red-Headed Slut. This is made of 1 oz. of peach schnapps, 1 oz. of Jagermeister, and 3 oz. of cranberry juice. Then they showed me something called a Wet Pussy. This is made of 3 oz. of butterscotch schnapps and 5 drops of Tequila Rose. Then they ordered me a Blow Job. This is made of $\frac{3}{4}$ oz. of Bailey's Irish Cream, $\frac{3}{4}$ oz. of Kahlua and is topped with whipped cream. Then they got me a Slow Comfortable Screw Up Against the Bedpost Mexican Doggy Style. This is made of 1oz. Vodka, $\frac{1}{4}$ oz. Rum, 1 oz. Coconut Rum, 1 oz. Tequila Gold, 1 oz. Melon Liqueur, 1 oz. Sloe Gin, 1 oz. Southern Comfort, 1 oz. Cranberry Juice, 1 oz. Orange Juice, 1 oz. Sour Mix. Then I had a Chihuahua

Orgasm on a Hot August Evening. This is made of 2 oz. of Kahlua, 1 oz. of Tequila, 2 oz. of Lime Vodka, 3 oz. of Orange Juice. The last thing I got, which wasn't really a drink at all, was called Herpes.

When you search "Dulcet" on google the first suggested search is "Dulcet cuisine." You will find out that dulcet cuisine is a line of artisan made sauces and marinades. When you alter the search to "Dolcett" you find another version of cuisine. You will find pictures of sexual cannibalism. You will find pictures of torture. You will find pictures of consensual cannibalism. You will find links to Dolcett support groups. You will find links to dating websites that cater to people with a Dolcett fetish. There will even be links to websites that post videos of "real virgin sacrifice." I found these sites with safe search on.

When you search "stories about" on google the first suggested search is "stories about celebrities." The second suggested search is "stories about drug use." The third suggested search is "stories about love." The rest of the suggested searches are references to the plot lines of pornography. When you alter the search to "stories about google" there are no suggested searches. The only links that come up are ads for google and google images. The story titled "Google This" by MJ McGinn doesn't come up in any of the links. In fact there is no way to google this story.

I Describe the Last Time My Parents Had Sex

I wanted to tell you to imagine two cacti
discussing the latest in what it's like being cacti

but I remember how I didn't always know what that looked like either.

I guess what I mean is that it's a convergence
of sharpnesses. They disagree on everything,

which makes sense, which is really why they keep coming back.

Let me try again: two neighbors chatting
idly under a streetlight, their silhouettes amorphously

fluttering into each other. Like pouring Half and Half

into a churning vat of cement. It's an arrival, sure.
But it's also a tasteless joke, one they should be better than.

Let me get to the point (the fucking point, if you will):

Two rowboats pass each other as they burble
down the river,

which politely declines any symbolic value in this poem.

A knife and a ladle arrive at an extremely undisclosed location.
Both swear they were told the other needed to see them.

A lunar eclipse occurs, because you seem to need that.

Is that clearer? This is where we join the story.
Really, you're right – we didn't mean to – but there we are.

And now, seeing ourselves, it's hard not to feel like we should have expected this.

Because, after all, everything is some kind of arrival.
The joke is on us, or the cacti, or the convergence

that did not happen under a streetlight,

the envious shadow tearing in two, growing dully huge
as it extracts itself from light. The shadow is not undergoing

an arrival. The shadow is mewing, it's begging, it's calling

my name. So here: do you get it? I can't just keep
watching. Can't let the shadows keep pulling apart. You're on your
own now.

By the way. The river? I was lying. The river will save you, it wants
you, it's bearing down upon you.

Butterflies

Caught in the jaws of a butterfly
with your toes curling up like eyelashes
you start to imagine how you got here.
It must've looked something like this, you feel,
although hopefully more businesslike.
Then, thinking about the hobbies of the middle-aged,
you remember that time your Uncle Blake took you
to watch the demolition of the fish-packing warehouse.
There was something fantastic about how
the bulldozers tore right through the lusterless sheets of tin.
You thought at first it was all going into the ocean.
Now, disenchanted, you recall that your uncle
hasn't been gainfully employed since the late 1980's.
Your attention returns to the butterfly kisses
currently engaging your lips.
They feel wonderful, but with that unbearably
tense anticipatory feeling, as though somehow
they've entered a vital organ.
You clutch her and breathless whisper her name.
But the sensation fades and in a moment
you finish moving and then
you just lay there,
letting your thoughts float away.

Ship Without Fools

So was the racket that occurred on the hill:
The mast of the ship cracked into the surface
Of the jutting geographical structure peering
Into the coastal waters and beyond the horizon
And nobody inhabited it.

If an imaginary soul were to be transplanted
The hill would have its casualties, be honored
By photographers who win Pulitzer prizes,
And onlookers who weep upon an already dewy flower.

But then ship had no captain for its soul,
So where did it go? Down, into the depths of a hill
Where mankind refused to tread
Because the hill was too high for humanity's ambition.

As the ship lay waste, the lighthouse began to flicker
Into red vitality, and there lay its fire, unbound, against the day
To a ship with no name and no intelligence
Fraught with the danger of riding alone into the geography.

Some have said the ship's men decided
That the lighthouse was a figment, that it was a scam
Promoted by humanity's fallibility
And it would never come.

The men decided to swim to Wales, their closest stop
And let the ship become a nomad of the sea
And subservient to a wind current, basing itself
Within wind pressures and pushing for its sake.

When the witnesses saw the ship, they said:
"Poor Wales. They are missing a vehicle."
And the vehicle missed them
The wind turned away and rotated to more flotsam extant.

The Interview

I watched the city underbelly flicker by for forty-some minutes, tactfully ignoring the gazes I could feel falling on me. They fell like sleet, pressed into the skin on my chest and my arms, on the back of my neck, leaving indentations like pock-marks all over me.

Some stares were sickened, satisfied, speculative. All were impressed – at least a little, whether or not they betrayed their owners' intentions and revealed the weakness inherent in desire.

Who could help but feel the smallest tinge of jealousy? I can see it in the way their jaws drop ever so slightly, in a nauseous twitch.

It's welling up in the centers of their chests. It gets swallowed back down to the recesses of their guts, goes down like medication – it's unpleasant, to be sure, but the benefit claws numbingly at their minds, masking the bitterness and the way the sugar pills stick to the backs of their throats.

I sit across from a man—a great man, a man who wouldn't recognize his own fucking children. Just as well; they'd rather not recognize him.

His eyes drift up and down, at the pock-marks, at the knot around my throat and at the skin wrapped around my feet. It's a good tight knot; I could stop breathing at any moment. And it's Italy's finest skin.

Satisfaction. But the jealousy is there, too. I watch him choke down his sugar pills without a thought. Filthy habit.

He only wants to know himself the way he knows me. I can hear it in the mindless clearing of his throat. I project myself into the seat facing him, flickering, flat, and pixilated. His jaw drops ever so slightly. I gently close my eyes, lift him by the leg and sling him into the wall. With a cold thud, his head makes contact and splits open like a cantaloupe. And the seeds run free.

The Dinner Table Dance

Around the table, from my left, were Mr. Joyce, Mr. Kouros, Mr. Yasu, Mr. Augustine, Mr. McKay, Mr. Reynard, and, of course, myself. At the moment, the only sounds echoing from the walls of the dining room were those of forks and knives gently clinking, lungs methodically pulling in and turning out air, and the fire slowly eating away at a thick slice of tree. All were chewing, chewing, swallowing, cutting, lifting, chewing nearly perfectly in sync. More crackling from the fire. A candle at the center of the table sputters.

"Hah, hah, whoa there, hah," said Mr. Joyce, mocking fear at the flame's behavior. "Hah, hah, hah" rose from the other five. Not me, I never laugh. The recited "Hah"s die down, and the breathing, chewing, and burning retake control of the air. One by one, like dancers, they lifted, poured, and lowered their wine glasses.

"More wine, anyone?" the young Mr. Kouros asked, lifting a bottle briefly from the table. "No?" He released the bottle and returned to his food. I looked up from my own food for a moment to observe the smoothly coordinated motions of my peers, and noticed something out of the ordinary. Mr. Reynard had ceased his cutting and chewing. His fork and knife lay dormant on his plate, his hands motionless in his lap. For a moment, his face screamed horror. Written in his eyes was nothing less than pure terror. Not half a second later, the flesh of his face simply began to melt. Slowly, but surely, his skin began to drip like wax from his skull. Shortly, his neck had begun to melt too, then his shoulders.

Unsure, I looked up to my five solid compatriots. Mr. Joyce looked to Mr. Reynard, but quickly downed a glass of wine, and looked back at his food. Mr. Kouros stared intently at his plate, almost determined not to raise his eyes. Mr. Yasu timidly poured himself a glass of wine and focused himself entirely on it. Mr. Augustine stealthily let his monocle fall from his eye. Mr. McKay, though, like me, was turning his eyes back and forth from Mr. Reynard to the rest of the table. Mr. McKay even went so far as to reach for poor Reynard as he melted from his chair. Mr. Reynard was a puddle seeping into the carpeted floor. McKay's and my eyes met, and for a moment, a frown found it's way to his spectacled face, though it was soon swept away by

the blank face of mediocrity. And the fired burned, and the forks
scraped, and six sets of lungs went on heaving.

Cyane

There stood the Nymph, whose name was Cyane. She recognized the God, and said; 'O thou shalt go no further, Pluto, thou shalt not by force alone become the son-in-law of Ceres. It is better to beseech a mother's aid than drag her child away.' The son of Saturn blazed with uncontrolled rage; and urged his steeds, and hurled his royal scepter in the pool. The mournful Cyane began to grieve, because from her against her fountain-rights the goddess had been torn. The deepening wound still rankled in her breast, and she dissolved in many tears, and wasted in those waves which lately were submissive to her rule.

-From Book V of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

I.

I cannot speak the act.

His blow

as he dove away with her, stole too

my voice.

Then mute, but not blind,
I dissolve and watch
as my words float away from me

the current
pulls them through what, once,
were my fingers.

II.

Yesterday, or what I perceived
to be such a space, She, that earthy
mother, passed over
what remains of me.

I wanted to shout "I know!
scoop me up and deliver
me into your basin and my mouth,
re-born, would gladly speak the act."

i know

But you did not glance down
at this polluted spring
nor did you blink as you
strode over my shattered self
so many little pieces
unencased mercury
that slips
through
your fingers
unable
to be measured
denied form
absolved
from recognition

III.

And where am I now?

The pieces

of me are too many to exist
only here
I am everywhere
and therefore

nowhere.

IV.

sometimes, i feel
the pieces of me

Samantha Owen

brush against each other
and then, the joy
of becoming whole.

it is a brief touch
a brush of a kiss
myself gives to itself
before being pulled
apart and left
to drift

waiting

for another kiss

V.

is that me there
reflecting myself
upon myself
i am stars too far
away to see
no i am a clump
of sand squeezed
in your palm
thrown down below
sinking
through the cracks

and

i reflect the act

The Inevitable Extinction of Filing Cabinets

Ever since the dawn of history, history began to be kept track of. Of course, this was done in some type of written form, such as this document you are reading right now, except it was most likely etched into some type of rock. As paper was introduced into the world of records, it became much cheaper and easier to write things down. An abundance of things were then written and it has since only gotten worse. With such an overload of documents and silly nonsense, man needed a way of organizing and pack-ratting it away. Consulting Wikipedia, I am unable to locate a name for such an inventor to give my thanks. There are also varying size filing cabinets for countries, like the U.S., that use 8.5" x 11" paper and countries that use A4 size paper. Maybe there were multiple masterminds from around the world behind this. Although most likely he (or "they") is (or "are") dead and a hand written thank you note would be fruitless anyway. How does one go about thanking someone for such a momentous and impactful invention after he or she has passed away? Buy their product of course! The monetary value attributed to whatever it is you are buying is almost like a tribute to the dead. A consumer culture peels away into a worship lifestyle of a dead inventor. I'm not condoning this nor am I suggesting this, but as I look back at previous sentences, it almost suggests this in a way. Or maybe I'm just suggesting that I am suggesting it and was really not making a point at all. Cut this paragraph and file it under "irrelevant." Unless of course you are reading this on your computer and not as a print out, then continue to my next point.

Two words: email. It really is two words: "electronic mail." I'm not stupid, only trying to make a joke of a fact. See, email is cutting into our, as most people address it, "snail mail." All of these paperless transactions are cutting into what was once a necessity for an envelope and stamp. Eliminating all of these documents significantly reduces what once was facilitated by the a filing cabinet. Office filing cabinets are dwindling. What was once a beautiful forest of metal towers beside the ho hums of office cubicles is now merely a dead space. Or even worse, been replaced with ferns or aloe plants. Heck, this was the

reason I gave up the pursuit of paper pushing and turned to my childhood dream of paleontologist.

And what about the poor child who has misbehaved all of his life in class and then one day decides to scheme the great scheme he has seen in a multitude of films. The Bart Simpson of the school knows he has a bad track record and decides that today is the day he will break into the principal's office and steal his permanent record. He has been in the office so many times before but has never been into Mr. Schwartz's closet where he assumes all of these elusive permanent records are kept. He gets into the office after a few smooth moves and makes his way towards the closet door. He pulls off his smooth moves again and opens the door to see the glorious... collection confiscated nonsensical knick-knacks. Sure they are cool as hell, but it's not the thing he was looking to fix his future. The permanent records are no longer filed away but merely stored electronically in a computer. Looks like the little Bart wannabe is not going to college now and all because of filing cabinets filing their way out of the general public's life.

If you wanted to know more about that "I wanna be cool like that spiky yellow-haired kid" kid, then check the *T* section in the permanent records from William Bell Middle School; "Thomas, Richard" to be exact. If you would like to hear more about Richard's life, continue on, otherwise, skip down until you see this: ^__^

Richard got straight checks through elementary, except the one time he got a check-plus for his 4th grade art class. Although he wasn't very good at art though either, it was mostly because he accidentally made the best yellow bear-holding-a-telescope sculpture Ms. Green had ever seen. In middle school, he started off 6th grade with all Bs except one D in English. He was never a very good writer but "has potential if he actually put his mind to it" as Ms. Peckly had commented. 7th grade made him realize "C is not for cookie", but rather c-quential groundings. Richard, or "most kids have a good laugh from Rich's comments during class, however they are typically inappropriate" (Mr. Dornamen, 6th grade math), is currently enrolled in the lower track 8th grade classes with the potential for Ds. And this is why Rich would want to steal his permanent record from Mr. Schwartz's office, which he cannot do due to a lack of filing cabinets and then goes on to never attending college. This is your second chance to skip reading more about Rich's life. Just saying since my argument concerning filing cabinets really starts to heat up shortly. But I completely understand if

you're interested in Rich. Mary was. But that is irrelevant, so don't ask. Mary is currently married (and not to Rich) with two children. She's gotten rather heavy since our high school days; although it is quite possible she has lost weight since our 20th high school reunion. I still thought she was very attractive. That's all you need to know about Mary.

Rich did not receive detention for breaking into Mr. Schwarz's office since his "smooth moves" were extra smooth, but he did get detention for getting caught being in the school still after classes were dismissed and not participating in any extracurriculars such as tennis or the golf theory club. This is when he devised his plan for running away from his problems, such as home life and his allergic reaction to the large ornamental shrubbery outside the main office. When he got to the food part of his planning of his running away, he realized he had forgotten to eat his lunch, and of course food and beverages are prohibited in detention hall. This is where he devised another great plan with his smooth moves. There was still 2 hours left of detention since Rich was only thirty minutes in. He also knew that his plan would require two separate instances of leaving the room. Rich began to moan slightly and hold his stomach. The proctor looked up in Rich's direction, seemed to mentally take note of the situation, and then resumed grading her history papers concerning "The Life and Times of Dwight D. Eisenhower." After approximately five minutes, Rich repeated the gesture and held it out for a hair longer. This time, he made his way up to the proctor and asked to use the restroom. She let him go right away. The bathroom was directly across the hall from where detention regularly convenes. Once in a stall, he pulled out his cell phone and sent a text to his friend Matt who has a snowboard theory club meeting the second Tuesday of every month, which it just so happened to be. Rich instructed Matt to go to his locker, retrieve his bagged lunch from the top shelf, and bring it to him in fifteen minutes. "If you could," he added since he enjoyed being polite to his good friend. Rich flushed the empty toilet and returned to detention hall. He felt his pocket vibrate, hopefully containing the signal that his plan was underway. Of course he couldn't know for sure since cell phones are also banned from detention. Twelve minutes passed and Rich started his stomach pain routine. He had already established the usually unnecessary need for multiple bathroom trips and the proctor let him go again with little questioning. He found Matt already in the bathroom

checking his teeth. Matt had a habit of doing that after the spinach incident. You'd think 8th graders wouldn't like spinach, but Matt did. He said he read once in a magazine that Shawn White eats it all the time. Thanking Matt, he received his lunch and devoured the sandwich, potato chips, and Yoo-Hoo in that order. He returned to detention hall with the smell of bologna on his breath. But no one ever knew since talking was also banned in detention.

Rich's escape plan went into action the following Friday. He left his mother and father a well crafted good-bye note. Had Ms. Peckly read the note, she would have been pleased to realize that she was correct about Rich's writing and his tremendous potential. Rich got as far as the city limits before being caught by Paul Germano, a pizza shop owner who had seen a "lost child" poster with the same face on his way to buying more cans of tomato paste from the local grocer. Rich actually lasted five days out on his own, the longest amount of time for a runaway child in the area if you don't count the ones who never turned up again. Paul stalled Rich long enough in his restaurant until the police could make it over in rush hour traffic. Two cops showed up; one stayed near the door, and the other walked over to the owner by the front counter. Paul pointed out the boy and the cop made his way over to where he was seated. Rich knew his gig was up and that he could not pull his smooth moves on police since his last and only encounter prior concerning etching a heart containing "R + M 4 EVR" into a tree trunk in the local park. He politely offered the cop the remaining slices of his large pepperoni pizza that Paul had given to him at no charge. The two cops, Rich, and a to-go box left the restaurant and made their way over to the police station.

This was a bigger deal than scratching letters into a tree, so they pulled up his file (on the computer nonetheless. the station had recently gone paperless effective 3 months prior). This was also a bigger deal because young Richard Hillman discovered that this was not really his name, but rather he was a Richard Thomas. The police quickly realized after the expression on Rich's face that they disclosed too much information and it was now time to phone his foster parents. When Mr. and Mrs. Hillman showed up, they thanked the two police officers and took note to send a thoughtful letter to Paul Germano when they returned home. Still in the station, they sat down with their adopted son and told him that when he was fourteen months old, they adopted Rich since there was no father to be found and the mother was an alcoholic

and unfit to raise a child. Rich was shocked and unsure of what to say, but did know he wanted to meet his real parents. The officer whom Rich offered pizza pulled up a file with the name “Thomas, Abigail” on the screen and a picture of a brunette woman. The officer also noted that prior, Abigail had once had the last name of “Miller” and it seemed as though she had changed it to “Thomas” approximately ten months prior to Rich’s birth. The two officers said that she probably changed her last name to that of the man who knocked her up since she was never married. They then promptly apologized for such informal terminology. Rich would soon go on to find Abigail Thomas in a half-way house and said his only “hello” and “goodbye” to her, leaving with the souvenir of the first tears he had cried since he scraped his knee falling off his bike in the third grade. Abigail did not have any recollection of ever giving birth. Rich returned to the police station two months later demanding to find out about his real father. They performed a DNA test, and another two months passed.

Three weeks before his fifteenth birthday, Richard Hillman (he wanted to be associated with his reliable parents) received a letter addressed from someone located in Dublin, Ohio. His mother gave him the letter and he opened it without haste. He read the contents over once, causing a tremendous smile to stretch across his face. Mrs. Hillman asked to know what the letter contained and he read it a second time, this time aloud. It recognized him as the illegitimate child of the late founder of Wendy’s Old Fashioned Hamburger chain Dave Thomas. Rich was also to inherit the position that Dave once held as he was the only heir. Mr. and Mrs. Hillman found this outcome to be a bit antiquated but let Rich make the final decision concerning his own life. Rich decided to change his name back to Thomas, which resulted in his school records to revert back also and hence why one would find his file under *T* rather than *H*. Rich would go on to finish high school, something he agreed to do after strong recommendation from Mr. and Mrs. Hillman. Rich then never went to college and made an adequate income. And all because filing cabinets no longer were put into use by William Bell Middle School.

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Here is the alternate universe outcome had filing cabinets still been used: Rich locates the filing cabinet and pulls out his folder. He removes all of the documents with negative comments and replaces them with ones he had written up prior to the break in. They were

comments concerning his achievements, but only lukewarm to not overdo his craftwork. He also replaced the Cs with Bs, and the Bs with As. He did however leave two Cs to not make him appear to be quite the overachiever. His confidence changed dramatically and he realized he must take his schoolwork more seriously after he went through a small hump of depression after the passing of his German grandmother from his mother's side. He joined the snowboard theory club with his friend Matt. After his fifth snowboard outing, he broke his arm in two places. He was airlifted from the slopes to a hospital ten minutes away by helicopter. There he decided that he was fascinated with the world of medicine and made the decision to pursue the path of a doctor and save people's lives. Richard would then graduate magna cum laude from the University of Penn. Before reaching the age of fifty, he would set the course for the cure to AIDs which would finally be discovered by his assistant Brian Kim. Richard would ironically die after he had been fighting AIDs for quite some time. Richard had been unable to identify the source of his disease but most likely attributed it to the last night he was ever drunk and woke up in a hotel twenty miles from his house. Brian would make the miraculous solution a mere five years after Richard's death. A new wing on the expanded medical school at Penn would be named in Richard's memory. And all because filing cabinets were still put into use by William Bell Middle School.

In regard to diseases and untimely deaths, another point can be made due to the decline in file cabinet use and the laziness of people. The introduction of the microwave has not only caused people to become lazy (a reason for the growth of email) but also increased inadequate use. This "inadequate use" is, for one, people "cook" things too frequently, and two, most people don't operate the cancer box with a ten-foot stick as to avoid its death rays. These two things have led to an increase in cancer patients and a decrease in the number of years the average person lives. With all of these years cut from the normal citizen, he has less time to accumulate papers and documents necessary to be filed. Filing cabinets are then only ever partially full. The deceased also passes off his belongings to the younger generation in his will whom had never developed the full appreciation for such a functional piece of furniture. The artsy kids turn the filing cabinets into useless lawn decorations, while the sporty types use it as practice with their mallets to develop a better swing to win prizes at the summer carnival.

One may say, "Hey. Why didn't you write this on paper to avoid

people ever reading it on a computer and never actually printing it out?" I would respond, "Well, this important document would more than likely be scanned and converted to a PDF file, so I might as well cut out the middle man. Besides, I can then mass email this and print it out with greater ease." One would then respond to my response, "Oh. I guess you make a good point." To further my promotion, I shall reiterate what has previously been said in its entirety to make sure my point resonates and also to occupy more space in a filing cabinet.

Ever since the dawn. Of history history began to be kept track of. Of course this was done, in some type of written form. Such as this: Document. You are reading right now! Except! It was most likely. Etched – into some type of rock. As paper was, introduced into the world. Of records, it became much cheaper. And... easier! To write things down, an abundance of things were then written. And! It has since only gotten worse? With such an overload of documents and silly nonsense!? Man(!), needed a way of organizing and pack-ratting. It. Away. Consulting Wikipedia... I am... unable. To locate, a name for such an inventor, to give my thanks. There are also. Varying size filing cabinets, for countries, like the us that use 85' x 1.1" paper. And countries, that use a... 4 size paper. Maybe there were multiple. Masterminds from around the world. Behind this, although most likely. He "or (they)" is "or (are)" dead. And! A hand written thank you! Note, would be fruitless anyway. How does one go? About thanking... someone. For such a momentous and impactful, invention after he or she has passed. Away? Buy their product! Of course... the monetary value. Attributed to whatever it is you are buying, is almost like a tribute. To the dead, a consumer culture peels away. Into a worship lifestyle of a dead inventor, I'm not condoning this. Nor am I suggesting this? But, as I look back at previous sentences... it almost suggests this in a way... or maybe! I'm just suggesting. That I am suggesting it. And was really not making a point? At all, cut. This paragraph and file, it under [irrelevant]. Unless, of course, you, are reading. This on your computer, and not as a print out. Then! Continue to my next. Point.

Two words. Email it. Really, is two words. Electronic mail, I'm not stupid. Only trying to make a joke. Of a fact, see, email is cutting. Into our, as most people. Address it "snail mail"! All of these paperless.

Transactions are cutting. Into what was once a necessity. For, an envelope and stamp, eliminating all of these documents. Significantly! Reduces what, once then was facilitated, by the need for a filing cabinet? Office filing cabinets are... dwindling! What was once a beautiful forest of metal. Towers beside the ho hums of office, cubicles. Is now merely a dead space? Or even... worse been replaced. With ferns or aloe plants, heck, this was the reason I gave up. The pursuit of paper pushing, and turned to my childhood dream. Of paleontologist.

And, what about the poor child? Who has misbehaved? All of his life, in class, and then one. Day decides to scheme. The great scheme he has seen in a multitude of films. The Bart Simpson of the school knows. He has a bad track record and decides that today. Is the day he will break into the principals. Office and steal his permanent record he has. Been in the office... so? Many times before, but has never been, into Mr. Schwartz's closet, where he assumes. All of these elusive permanent records are kept... he gets into the office. After a few smooth moves, and makes his way, towards the closet! Door, he pulls off. His smooth moves again, and opens the door to see the glorious. Collection! Confiscated nonsensical knick-knacks. Sure they are. Cool as hell but it's not. The thing he was looking to fix, his future, the permanent records, are no longer filed. Away! But merely... stored! Electronically in a computer looks like the little Bart wannabe. Is not going to college now and all? Because of filing cabinets, filing their way? Out of the General Publics' life.

If. You. Wanted. To. Know. More about, that I, wanna be cool. Like that spiky yellow haired. Kid... kid, then check the T. Section in the permanent records from: William Bell Middle School Thomas Richard. To be exact, if you would like to hear... More about Richards' life, continue on otherwise. Skip! Down until, you, see. This: J

Richard got straight checks through elementary, except the one time he got a check-plus for his 4th grade art class. Although he wasn't very good at art though either, it was mostly because he accidentally made the best yellow bear-holding-a-telescope sculpture Ms. Green had ever seen. In middle school, he started off 6th grade with all Bs except one D in English. He was never a very good writer but "has potential if he actually put his mind to it" as Ms. Peckly had commented. 7th grade

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which it just so happened to be. Rich instructed Matt to go to his locker, retrieve his bagged lunch from the top shelf, and bring it to him in fifteen minutes. "If you could," he added since he enjoyed being polite to his good friend. Rich flushed the empty toilet and returned to detention hall. He felt his pocket vibrate, hopefully containing the signal that his plan was underway. Of course he couldn't know for sure since cell phones are also banned from detention. Twelve minutes passed and Rich started his stomach pain routine. He had already established the usually unnecessary need for multiple bathroom trips and the proctor let him go again with little questioning. He found Matt already in the bathroom checking his teeth. Matt had a habit of doing that after the spinach incident. You'd think 8th graders wouldn't like spinach, but Matt did. He said he read once in a magazine that Mary eats it all the time. Thanking Matt, he received his lunch and devoured the sandwich, potato chips, and Yoo-Hoo in that order. He returned to detention hall with Mary on his mind. But no one ever knew since talking was also banned in detention.

Rich's escape plan went into action the following Friday. He left his mother and father a well crafted grocery list. Little did they know, their son Rich was going to do the shopping and this list was futile. Rich walked to the local grocer, although grocer is such a loose term as it was more like a super supermarket. There he bought hotdogs, turkey, baking soda, Cheerios, a head of lettuce, carrots, spinach, vegetarian hamburgers, cherries, cooking wine, vinegar, 100% cocoa baking chocolate, oatmeal, potato chips, ice-cream sandwiches, sliced turkey, a half gallon of 2% milk, a gallon of lemonade, discount marshmallows, three cans of corn, a quarter pound of American cheese, two boxes of penne pasta, a jar of tomato sauce, two tomatoes, one potato, a bag of tangerines, a cucumber, and one pound of green beans. With this, he returned home. His parents thanked him, but were also upset as they too just went out and bought the same list of groceries. That night they all had a good laugh. And twice the amount of food they were originally planning, so they invited the neighbors over too. But they politely declined, for they knew this family laughed too often. And laughing too often makes you live longer. And this family living longer is a dangerous thing. Everyone tries to forget the lawn mower fiasco. Fluffy and Mr. Biddles almost bit the dust. And on any other day, these two would normal be shoved into a filing cabinet by their owners two year old son.

That kid was a jerk. He was also Mary's younger brother. Adopted though. Everyone in this town was adopted. In was a town built upon fundamentalists that really had no idea what they were doing. They had filed all of their good ideas in a filing cabinet but filed that cabinet in a storage unit four miles down the road from the house that burned down recently. That was a nice house too. It had green shutters. Anyway, the filing cabinets were stolen. And that was about it. The filing cabinets were imported too. They fit A4 sized documents, rather than the norm for U.S. citizens. These cabinets went for a premium and the robbers knew this. Rich eloped with Mary and they lived happily ever after. After. After. After. After. Aft. er. I told you to skip this but clearly you didn't. You are a terrible reader. I thought you could read. I gave you this one simple task, but you couldn't do it. You failed. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200 dollars. What about inflation? So what? You might as well just put this in your filing cabinet in the folder marked with a little sad face. You know what that sad face stands for? It stands for "things I can't read", but you had to put a picture on there because you wouldn't know what it was otherwise. Since you can't read. Why do I bother. Why? I'm talking to no one now. Firstly, I insulted you, secondly, you can't read. I tried. I really did. You probably don't even care about Mary at this point, let alone even grasp who she really is...

Here is the alternate. Universe, outcome had, filing cabinets. Still been used, Rich locates. The filing cabinet and pulls out. His folder; he removes all. Of the documents, with negative comments, and replaces. Them with ones he had! Written up prior, to the break in, they were comments. Concerning his achievements, but only lukewarm, to not overdo. His craftwork... he also replaced. The C's with B's and the B's. With as he did. However, leave two C's. To not make, him appear! To be quite, the overachiever! His confidence... changed! Dramatically, and realized, he must take his schoolwork. More seriously, after he went. Through a small hump of depression. After the passing of his German, grandmother from his mothers' side, he joined. The snowboard, theory club, with his friend. Matt, after his fifth snowboard outing, he broke his arm in two. Places, he was airlifted, from the slopes to a hospital. Ten minutes away by helicopter, there he decided that; **he was fascinated!** With the world of, medicine and made, the decision to pursue the path of a... doctor? And save people's live's Richard would then graduate. Magna cum laude from The University. Of Penn, before

reaching the age of fifty, he would set the course. For the cure to aids which would finally be discovered. By his assistant, Brian Kim, Richard would ironically die. After he had been fighting aids for quite some time, Richard had been unable to identify. The source of his disease, but most likely attributed, it to the last night. He was ever drunk and woke up. In a hotel, twenty miles from his house, Brian would make the miraculous solution. A mere five years after, Richard's death a new wing. On the expanded medical school, at Penn, would be named. In Richard's memory and all. Because filing cabinets were still put into use, by William Bell Middle School.

In regard, to diseases and untimely deaths another point. Can be made. Due to the decline in file cabinet use, and the laziness of people, the introduction of the MicroWave, has not only caused people. Become lazy! A reason for the growth of email but. Also, for inadequate use this inadequate use is for one people. Cook things too! Frequently and two most people don't operate. The cancer box, with a ten-foot stick, as to avoid it's death rays, these two things have led. To an increase in cancer, patients and a decrease in the number of years. The average person lives. With all of these years, cut from the, normal citizen he has. Less time to accumulate! Papers and documents, necessary to be filed, filing cabinets are then. Only, ever partially full, the deceased also passes. Off, his belongings to the younger. Generation in his, will whom? Had never developed, the full appreciation, for such a functional piece of furniture. The artsy kids, turn the filing. Cabinets, into useless lawn, decorations. While, the sporty types use it. As practice with their mallets, to develop a better swing to win, prizes at the summer carnival.

One may say, "Hey!" Why didn't you write? This on paper, to avoid people ever reading. It on a computer, and never actually printing. It out! I would respond, "Well." This important Document would more than likely. Be... scanned. And converted. To a PDF file, so I might as well cut. Out the middle man! Besides I can. Then, mass email. This and print it out, with greater ease. One would then respond to my response, "Oh." I guess you make a good... point to further my promotion. I shall reiterate what? Has previously been said, in its entirety, to make sure my point... resonates. And also! To occupy more space! In a Filing Cabinet. Thanks. For reading that twice! I salute you! Read it all again (which would mean a total of four times) and your wildest dreams will

come true! I did (which seems silly since I am also the author) and shortly after my phone rang. It was Mary calling to say she had just divorced her husband. We are currently happily married.

An Imaginary Portrait of Stella as a Young Girl

The rain settles into pools that turn
tides as cars drive by. A young girl
in overalls rolled up to knifed knees watches
worms dance through stained rainbow
liquid, the glass of windows keeping her
from this wet world. So imagination goes
out to play for she must stay in cutting reality.
Lyrical bones dash through
seams of light and noise, sinews sewn
together by beating moth wings against
a shaken window pane. It is not dark outside.
The girl who dances in resolved puddles
has now been turned out for something done
unto her, unwanted caress. Her wet toes bare
against the welcoming mat that scratches
dirt away to unearth flawed flesh scarred
from his knife finger touch. Her moth
lashes beat shut, open, as the porch light
clicks on. Dreams come to curtain closings as
vicious impurity grasps at nonexistent wrists.
Hush hush father with arachnid
fingers says. Time to come
quiet like moths to illumination.
She has spiders in her hair.

At the Farm Market in Early Autumn

The day before, we were four hundred miles south,
where the leaves were still green, though thinning
on the trees, branches beginning to show through
like bones under skin. Once home,
we went to a farm market on the Erie Canal
where harvested apples were dying.
Batting away intrusive wasps,
we bit into doughnuts, our throats sticky with cider,
trying to make it look like nothing more
than a day in early October. Cool air
touched our faces as the sun melted,
falling slowly from the sky.
A little boy ran through the pumpkin patch
for the first time in his life. His mother snapped a photo,
and our whole family saw my cousin
as the boy was swept up in his father's arms, laughing,
reaching for the sun with both hands.
The light was too bright,
there were no shadows in which we could hide.
It was unflinchingly clear
that we could not scare away our lives
with the beauty of this day, the day my cousin died,
twenty-six years old, and every boy we see has his laugh,
his crooked teeth, his bounty
of life we cannot believe is gone. On this day,
our lives dropped from our hands
like overripe apples split open,
the meat of our bodies breaking from the core.

Victor Jorgensen's Photograph of the V-J Day Kiss

"New York City celebrating the surrender of Japan. They threw anything and kissed anybody in Times Square."

—Original photo caption

But the part they forgot to tell you
is that I was in love with a memory,
a boy from New Jersey whose hair was glazed
with rough Atlantic salt. I was in the Philippines
the day they buried him at sea. Strapped
into the arms of a stranger, all I knew was his breath,
smoky cloves and cognac. His mouth was dry,
but I felt it anyway, a candle wax burn
which pours down the throat and curdles
in the stomach: the thrilling misery
of kissing someone you don't love.
My hands were curled but so were his,
closed tight like oysters, too raw to open, so
he held me without hands, bearing up
my desperate body, and we gave each other
nothing that we had.

Lightning

My arm shakes
if I try to form anything delicate.
Whenever I'd write the word "love" on napkins or hands
they'd tear.

I stand in open fields during storms.
The lightning refuses to hit me,
to join with me for one moment
in a stagnated eternity.

I wear name tags in my house at night.
"Hello I'm..."

Just passing through.
Making amends.

Retreating.

The Citadel

I

My parents were always fighting in the kitchen,
as I was opening the back door to sweep out dust.
The dog would growl at the sound of the hinges.

II

I wanted to be my mother's soul
that ended up coloring the back wall of her bedroom closet
with blood.
She hated to paint in anything other than beige.
I will not be you, dad.
Rotting in a hospital,
tubes running their course inside you.
Machines mocking your heart.
The same way
your hand hit her on beat.

III

We all live inside this hollow metal,
this obsidian.
I sleep with the lights off,
so I can believe your eyes are open again
and I just can't see them through the darkness.

IV

i cannot allow for anyone to watch my reminiscing
and
mourning.

V

please don't fuck with me anymore,
cryptic house.
the smell of decaying wood
memories
skin.

VI

My life has become accepted enough to the point where any full
breath bringing any full season to my lungs is appreciated.

VII

All the citadels with their white-picket fences,
blackened spires all in a row.
Walls adorned with pale thoughts
framed in one bronze pattern.

IIIX

My childhood
my house
my citadel
is one in a neighborhood.
I'd tell my memories I'm sorry for forgetting them,
but they never apologized to me, either.

Whenever You Come Home from School

Your mother won't leave you alone
She's like all the bugs in the field when you're covered in sweat.
Incessantly examining your every detail with love in their antennas and their feet.
A few years ago you would have told her to leave
But you don't anymore.
I think you enjoy this time
When her eyes and fingers file the endless paperwork of your imperfections.

She's looking at your hair.
Your hair never stops demanding her attention.
If you were lucky she would begin and end with the hair atop your head
Millions of yellow soldiers patiently awaiting orders.
But she loves the hair on your head
The hair everywhere else
She does not love.

She keeps telling that it's not normal
Yet you continue to not care more and more.
She longs for her little doll
Who she would build and change like her own Lego set.
You love your new coat for taking you away from her,
For creating something new and exciting to frustrate her.

During that summer before your Junior year
Your hair escaped your head.
It took over not just your forearms,
But your biceps as well
And your shoulders
And the back of your neck.
It surrounded your legs like moss on a tree
Climbing from your ankles all the way to your waste.

It wasn't too interested in your hips.
I think it was saving energy for your stomach and your chest
It spent a lot of time organizing itself there.
Maybe that's why these are your favorites.
The way they supported her head as she watched her shows
While you concentrated on her breath as it came in and out.

It Came in a Dream

And you are boy,
body filling with the slow
hopelessness of lust.
Watching rusted leaves falling;
pale palms reach for the sky.
Into the backyard pool-
some stonework and stucco all around-
naked bodies wading
through the fallout
of first kiss,
in flood lamp excess.

It was a fire cracker
going off in your hand-
stale little pieces of red
embedding themselves snug
in the folds of your skin,
pinkpale creases in the flesh-
stains that
no amount of shaking
or washing could
get rid of.

The water was so cold
down there,
hundreds of miles below
the surface;
feeling the pressure of growing
out of yourself-
like diamonds beginning to bud.
Shining silken pods
that you will collect
to hold in your hands
and then hide them away for
a later day.

(something that comes
from body must have its beauty,
its uses)
find some jars and cigar boxes.
Hide it all away
before it evaporates
before it disappears
before you realize
it was only a stick of dynamite
going off in your head.

What I Know About Fission

I grew up
 in the shadow of cooling towers.
Looming renditions to be heard
 plucked by pigeon feet
on staccato high wires-
 Live and electrified.
The hum and buzz
 above
drowning out the hate
irradiating from my parents' bed room.

I remember my father
 (that tomcat) yowling
like a warning siren in heat
 searching
 prowling
for an escape
for a new mate.
Because the heat got to be too much,
 singd body hair
 sent wisps of smoke
into the atmosphere
for me to see (like distant smoke signals
my mother would send stuck
at home, burning the meatloaf)
and take into my hands;
 try to read them
 decode them
before they could escape my
 clenching fists.
Before I could realize
that there was nothing I could do
 and my father would never speak
 (had never spoken)
the words he'd said he had

again;
whispering
 calm
into her ear:
 “but listen,
the electricity in your lungs

wants to sing

and I want to hear again
‘cause I know
we *aren’t* driven

by any polarizing currents.”

So what?
 when my mother’s battery-heart
began to die
I saw her tempted,
 sinking alligator teeth deep
into her skin,
 trying for one more
jump-start
to get her far away from there.

 From that burning,
the misdirected passion
my father could no longer keep
 zippered up
in his gray hazmat suit
and red-striped tie.

The people from over the fence
 said of my parents
that all they had between them
 was just “wasteful energy,”
little plans based upon
 some preconceptions for a house
of the future,

Trevor Zumpano

a family of the
always.
But all they'd ever wanted
was a way to transcend
the lives that were only ever half-lived
and a place
to sit and watch their little family
mushroom
above their horizon.

CONTRIBUTIORS

Josh Aungst is to the negative space in a lower-case letter e as nobility is to the sound of change jingling in a homeless man's coffee cup.

Superman's pal **Amanda Blythe**

Dominic Castanzo was an inside job.

Allison Cavanaugh is an avid lover of all things artistic. She enjoys the company of tarantulas in her spare time.

Kristin Cichowski shuns reality and has moved to cyberspace.

Rosie Clark, like all good English majors, enjoys shaking her head at the ironies of life.

Sarah Cogswell is Jack's complete lack of surprise.

Adam DiCaprio is a four minute, fifty-four second YouTube video of a 1981 Ford F-150 (custom scale!) flopping around in the mud.

Elisa DiPrinzio has tofurky on her face. Don't tell her landlord she's subletting the space.

Regan Dohm is a Biology and Environmental Studies double major who enjoys merging her creative artistic side with her bio nerd persona. She frequently dabbled in art classes throughout high school and continues to develop her talent as a hobby (when time allows). Art keeps Regan sane in the fast-paced biology community here at Ursinus

Alyse Donnachie is a senior English major who apparently writes things sometimes.

Andrew Eron is best known for inventing words. In his spare time he enjoys the sport of man-trapping.

Noelle Goldcamp killed her dinner with karate.

Atticus Graven trained in writing at The Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts in San Francisco. He tends to write poetry but would rather write fiction if only he was better at it. Atticus hates small dogs, switchbacks, and referring to himself in the third person. His number one aspiration in life is to be knighted.

Some would try to warn you against doing things that have a chance of making you hurt, feel loss, or hole up in your room all together for weeks at a time. **Brooke Haley** would tell you to experience these things, if not to help you grow as a person, then at least to make you a better poet and give you something to write about.

Nick Hanford is a summation of the spirits of Paul Bunyan, Bernie Madoff, and Adam Smith; the American forefathers that made this country great. Nick is an avid collector of official presidential spittoons and other chewing tobacco paraphernalia. Make way for this mama grizzly!

James Harper knows: if you have Jesus Christ, you have everything. If you don't have Jesus, you have nothing.

Lindsay Hogan *terra incognita*

David Hysek is to words what Ron Swanson is to meat.

The claw has chosen **Brandi Killian**.

Edwin Kosik is the coastal town that they forgot to close down.

Shane Kowalski is probably the one not here. Nor there.

Cory Kram knows the gathering floozies afford to be choosy.

Joshua Krigman is not a fan of long goodbyes, so he will leave you with this:

Anna Lorine is a sophomore Biology major. She hopes to inspire you like you have inspired her. Ja Cie Kocham!

Greta Martikainen-Watcke is simultaneously racy and fresh, and intense and refined. She has a delicious layered core of wild blackberry, huckleberry and blueberry liberally laced with violet notes. The tannins stay in the background to let her core of fruit flavors shine through. Her long, mouthwatering finish lingers with bright acidity and floral notes.

Calla Mattox prefers to live a private life.

Tony McDonnell is a sophomore majoring in environmental studies.

MJ McGinn wants to know if you can handle the lockdown.

Connor McNamara is lush and fruit-forward, with oaky undertones, playful floral aromas, and hints of pineapple and guava. He is aged twenty years and presents firm tannins, as well as a full bodied flavor with creamy notes of radicchio and Second Wave allspice. He's assertive, with lots of depth and good legs. Would discreetly complement gluten-free potato chips or proto-vegan apple "sauce" faux-quail mineral gratin. Bottled by OCTCRCBC and the Twin Syndicate.

Logan Metcalf-Kelly thinks he owns the city. He overspeeds and never gets pulled over.

Benjamin Mooney is galloping manic to the mouth of the source.

Kate Murphy is a 20-year-old lion. And a vampire. And she runs like a dragon. Environmental Studies is her major.

Alexis Murauskas is actively trying to change her name to Olive, but it's not really working because her mother named her after Alexis James (an actress from the 40s) and those kinds of *tchotchkes* don't tend to get lost even if we try very, very hard to make sure they do. Her favorite poet is this kid she met on the internet named Andrew.

Andy Murray kisses hands and shakes babies. All for the good of the republic.

Rayna Nunes will swim sweetly as a herring through the ether, not despairing.

Samantha Owen cordially invites you to attend the Lobster Quadrille. Tea and the Queen's stolen tarts will be served as refreshments. No RSVP necessary though please try not to be late.

Jonathan Palmisano a.k.a. Jonny P a.k.a. Coah P a.k.a. Uncle Pennypincher has a PhD in Mechanical Engineering. He draws inspiration from his two grandchildren Todd and Remus. Once in a game of Capture the Flag he ran so fast his Nike Shox exploded.

Feather flexing will defeat **Rachel Perry** and it vexes her completely.

Why don't ya have a seat over here. What're you doing here? I'm **Abby Raymond** with *The Lantern*, and we're doing a story on internet predators.

Ellyn Rolleston is a Junior with an appreciation for American craft beers and British slang. She thinks too much about what to write in a 3-line biography. She suspects that she thinks too much in general.


Arielle Ross has been 'fessing double fast, answering questions nobody asked.

Sarah Round is a senior Biology major with a Creative Writing minor. She can often be found up to her elbows in formaldehyde, dreaming of the smells of hay and fresh laundry.

It had a nice a ring to it when the ol' op'ry house rang so with a solemn auld lang. Signed, sealed, delivered, **Scott Sherman** sang.

Sarah Schwolsky is in love with the hook upon which everyone hangs.

Dixon Speaker is a Sophomore English Major from Wallingford, Pennsylvania. He writes almost exclusively about himself.

Anton Teubner can teach you how to dougie. 

The time has come for **Robert Whitehead** to lip-sync for his life!

The sight of **Trevor Zumpano** makes calm canaries irritable and they caw and claw all afternoon.

